ヘヴィオブジェクト

HEAVY OBJECT

最も賢明な退却

Project Wise Kid

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン／
凪良 NAGIRYO

電撃文庫

Heavy Object - Volume 14
The Wisest Abandonment of Thought
— *Project Whiz Kid*

Contents

- Illustrations
- Prologue
- Chapter 1: Which is More Frightening: Shells or Overwork? >> Tank-Accompanied Battle in the Mekong District
- Chapter 2: Independent Action Taken as Casually as a Convenience Store Donation >> Domination of the North American Central Demilitarized Line
- Chapter 3: Welcome to the End of a Stable World >> Defense of the Chesapeake District
- Epilogue
- Afterword
- Credits

ヘビーオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
Project White Kid 最も聡明な思考放棄
鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン／
凪良 NAGIRYO
電撃文庫

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良 NAGIRYO

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT

Project Whiz Kid 最も賢明な思考放棄

INDEX

000010　序　章

000012　第一章
砲弾と過労はどっちが怖い?
>>メコン方面戦車随伴戦

000108　第二章
コンビニ募金感覚の独立運動
>>北米大陸中央非武装線攻略戦

000258　第三章
安定世界の終わりへようこそ
>>チェサピーク方面防衛戦

000418　終　章

【ジャックインザボックス】Jack In The Box

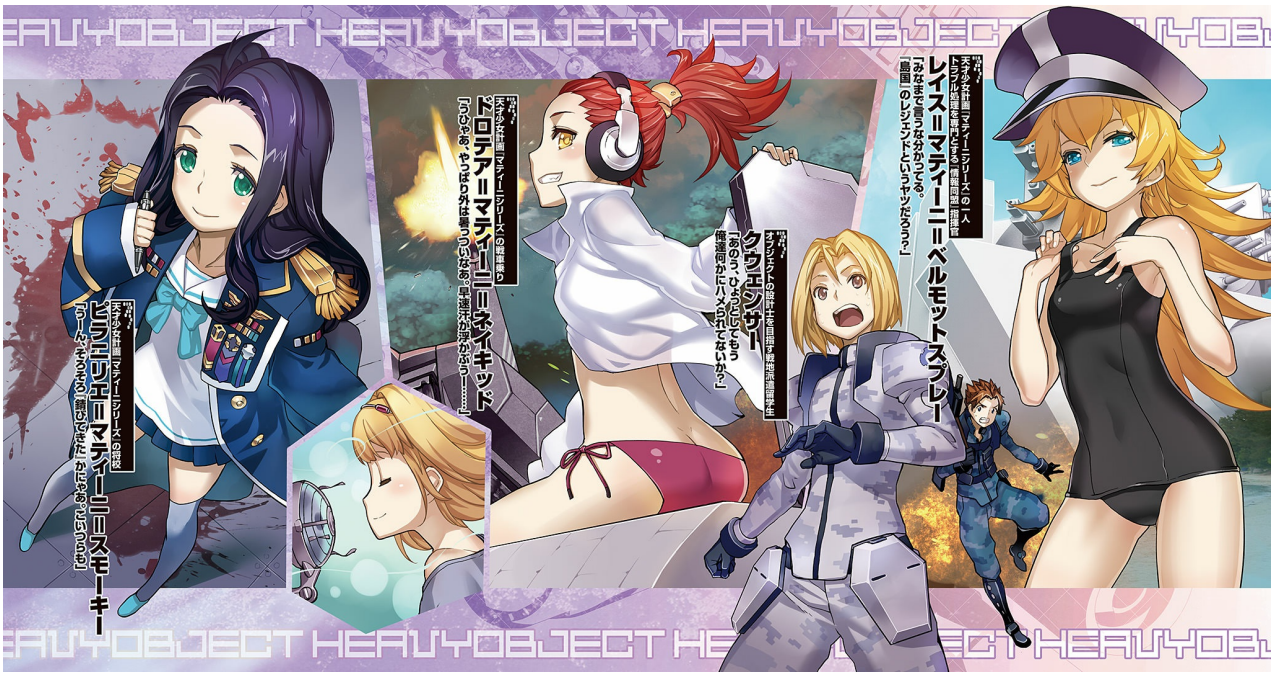
『信心組織』が運用する陸戦専用第二世代のオブジェクト。

弾性合金技術の塊であり、「びっくり箱」の名を冠するとおり強大なバネ仕掛けを要所に取り入れた機体。八本のアームを束ねてベクトルを合成し、重ね掛けしたバネ仕掛けで発射する金属実体砲を主砲とする。

また移動様式については四枚のフロートで構成されていた静電気式推進システムを採用しているが、球体状本体後部に接続された尻尾のような巨大な円筒を打ち込むことで、瞬発力と回避精度を高めている。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

name/Bloodrice=Capistrano
sex/male
place of birth/Paris,Normandy
age/27
height/185m
weight/69kg
hair color/silver
eye color/purple
class/succession ranking No.03
belong/Capistrano's family member
post/charitable person
height / 173m
weight / 51kg
body size / 97.58.81 (cm)
hair color / silver (+ blue dye)
eye color / purple
name / Frolaytia=Capistrano
age / 18
sex / female
class / Major
place of birth / Paris, Normandy
belong / 37th C.M.B.
post / commander of OBJECT operation (plural units)


HEAVYOBJECT
天才少女計画「マティーニ」シリーズの一人
トラブル処理を専門とする「問題関係」担当官
レイス＝マティーニ＝ベルモットスプレー
「みなまで言うな分かってる。「最低」のレジェンドというヤツだろう？」
天才少女計画「マティーニ」シリーズの一人
オブジェクトの設計士を目指す戦地派遣留学生
クウェンサー
「あのう、ひょうしにでもう俺迷何かにハメられてないか？」
天才少女計画「マティーニ」シリーズの後輩
ドロテア＝マティーニ＝ネイキッド
「うひゃあ、やっぱり外は暑っついなあ。早速汗が浮かぶう……」
天才少女計画「マティーニ」シリーズへの投役
ビフュリエ＝マティーニ＝スモーキー
「うーん、そろそろ飽きてきた、かにゃあ、こいつらも」

結果は今回も私の敗北だ。
まあ、泥沼処理専門のトラブルシューターなのだから構わんがね。
では諸君、次も金と情報の集まる戦場でまた会おう。

――とある『死神』のつぶやき

HEAVY OBJECT

Project Whiz Kid

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
最も賢明な思考放棄

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

Would you prefer to be ruled by people or by machines?

Oh, but don't just answer without thinking. This question contains a trick that cuts right to the inner side of whoever answers it.

To give it away, you can see a certain trait of people who say they would prefer machines. Those people don't believe they would ever be one of the rulers. So if the alternative is being outdone and trampled on by someone else, they would prefer for everyone to be ruled equally by machines.

So what about the other people? The people who prefer people think they could be one of those rulers. They see the machines as a group they can never be a part of, so it's pointless. They would prefer to maintain the human-ruled system so they can work to overthrow their ruler and end up at the top themselves.

Was that an unpleasant topic?

But the world is full of choices like that. The choices you make without really thinking reveal the beliefs you hold deep inside. Have you ever worried about someone seeing your search history? Or your online purchase history? How about the free-to-play apps you enjoy? Did anything come to mind?

With that in mind, give these questions a look.

- Who are happier: the poor or the rich?
- Which scares you more: becoming a perpetrator or becoming a victim?
- If you could be reborn, would you prefer to be the same sex or the opposite sex?

Yes, yes. It doesn't really matter how you answer these questions. You can judge someone's humanity by whether they change their answer because they know there's a trick or if they stick with their original answer.

But you don’t need to worry about this.

All of these questions are really only something inputted into a cold machine.

Chapter 1: Which is More Frightening: Shells or Overwork? >> Tank-Accompanied Battle in the Mekong District

Part 1

It was October.

The continent of Asia had a wide variety of regions and climates, from landlocked deserts to the oceanic Island Nation, but in the southern sea near the equator, the weather was still quite hot in this season. The unique humidity of Asia trapped that heat around you and the smell of the rotting trees and mud of the thick subtropical forest brewed a unique kind of “air”.

The two idiots named Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell had just infiltrated the Mekong District and completed a job there, so they and the other soldiers gave a look of annoyance at the beach where the clear water was washing in and out.

“…That was supposed to be our extraction point, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, hell. We spent five days without a single bath while we snuck through mangroves and blew away white powder processing plants, so what’s with the festivities here? Are they planning a parade for the triumphant return of Heivia the super handsome genius noble?”

They were on their way back from blowing up some old-style heroin factories that had started popping up all over the map, presumably because their market share was being threatened by the synthetic drugs that had become all the rage lately. This could get a little complicated, but poppy seeds produced opium, the primary component of opium was morphine, and morphine became heroin with some chemical processing. This will not be on the test, but it is all very dangerous, so pay careful attention. Anyway, they had gotten as far as blowing up the drug factories (which were rumored to have military connections) and returned.

A transport helicopter was meant to pick them up here so they could return to

the warship out at sea.

But they found something enormous there instead.

It was a battlecruiser of unknown affiliation.

It had been beached.

It was located entirely up on the white sand.

The mass of metal was more than 200 meters long and painted a faintly bluish gray. Three-gun sets of main cannons were stacked in tiers and the large ship's bridge towered up a bit toward the right. That said, the real firepower was in the vertical missile launcher tubes lined up along the stern of the ship. There were also Gatling guns and torpedo tubes arranged along either side like roadside trees.

"What do we do? Return to the hidden base in the forest?"

"When survivors from the heroin factories could still be wandering around out there? If we flee there and give away the position of all the secret facilities, we'd be putting our allies' lives at risk."

They then received an appreciated transmission from Her Excellency Frolaytia Capistrano, their busty, silver-haired commander who was monitoring the situation via satellite.

"Quenser, Heivia. Change of plans."

"What in the world is going on?"

"The start of fall is apparently the season for cyclones in Asia. You had trouble with that yesterday, if you recall. Well, an Information Alliance warship was beached by the storm. We've picked up their rescue signal out here at sea. Sorry about making you work again after your all-nighter, but could you start on some philanthropic work?"

"What!? You want us to help them!? Not kill them!?"

"There are international rules unrelated to war concerning shipwrecks. You've heard about another world power's submarine working to rescue the crew of a ship sunk in an accident, haven't you? If enemy and ally work together to save them, it apparently makes for a lovely story."

"…If that thing gets back out to sea, it's our asses it'll be targeting."

“The ship’s diesel engine and troop equipment are apparently still working, so if we attack them, it’s all you little foot soldiers that will be blown to bits. Are you sure you want that?”

A beached metal ship was a troublesome thing.

At sea, opening a single hole in its belly would sink it, but a much greater amount of firepower was needed to silence one on land.

“Of course, since we were ordered to help out instead of blowing it away with the Object, I can only assume there was some argument in the safe country council,” said Frolaytia. “Simply put, doing this favor here will let us withdraw from a war on the other side of the globe. This is another form of war. A great age of life and peace is counting on this. If you screw it up, that diplomatic card will fail and the councilors will be less than happy with us, so make sure you do this right.”

The two idiots stared at the radio for a while after the transmission ended. Once it was clear there was no changing this, they covered their faces with their hands.

“We don’t even get a chance to take a shower…?”

“Do you really think Miss Sadist would agree to that? She’d just say we already got one when that cyclone dumped rain on our heads all night long, so let’s get this over with so we can return to the fleet.”

And with that, the mission had begun.

The Information Alliance battlecruiser was more than 200 meters long and appeared to weigh about 70 thousand tons. They could not exactly tow it with a truck’s winch and they could not line up logs to roll it forward either. Neither were bad ideas for moving something big and heavy, but this was just *too* big and heavy.

“Welcome to Hotel Flagship 019!”

Someone approached them across the unnaturally white beach.

The old man seemed awfully cheerful for someone who had been shipwrecked and forced to get help from another world power. Because he worked on a ship, he wore a white uniform that did not even try to use camouflage and he was accompanied by several bodyguards. And all of those bodyguards were young women in pure white sailor uniforms. …The uniforms should not have been a problem for navy soldiers, so why did it look out of place on those sexy women?

The man who inspired thoughts of “death to the bourgeoisie” introduced himself.

“I am Alfred Silverking, captain of the Flagship 019. It would seem human race is practically brimming with good will. I truly appreciate this rescue.”

“We’ll help out, but we’re not about to enter under your command. So we’re not gonna change our language or our manners.”

“Perfectly understandable.” The gray-haired old man pulled out a thick pipe and one of his female bodyguards lit it with practiced hand. “Some of your people arrived from sea earlier and are already working, but, well, we are the ones in need. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.”

“…Why do you insist on speaking down to us, old man?”

“That is just how I am. Now, our objective is to return the ship to sea as quickly as possible, but a 70-thousand-ton ship will not be easily budged.”

“Tie it to an Object and tow it on out to sea, idiot.”

“The ship would tear in half. Sand has friction too, you see.”

The old man explained the situation to the idiot duo and their jolly friends. As they trudged through the sand on their way toward the Flagship 019, he groped the butt of one of his bodyguards while showing no sign he thought he was doing anything wrong.

“Luckily, my ship is not simply a giant hunk of metal. It has a large empty space within. And I have not received any word of a hole being torn in the hull when it was beached. So it would be best to return to the basics. Ships are built in shipyards on the land, but they are sent out to sea once they are completed. Now, how do they do that?”

Quenser frowned at that.

“…Fill the area below them with water?”

“Precisely. Luckily, there is only fine sand below my ship. That can be dug out if we put our minds to it. First, we must support it with pillars on both sides so it does not topple over. Yes, there must be more than 100 on either side to ensure the weight is not focused on a single point. Then we use heavy machinery to dig out the sand below the ship, create a large enough space, and guide seawater into that space. That will get my Flagship 019 afloat once more and it can be returned to the sea.”

“Wait, wait, wait!! Wait!! You make it sound easy, but that’s gotta mean digging out a hell of a lot of sand! Not only do we need a space below the ship, but we

need a route out to sea so it doesn't scrape its belly on the way. Are you asking us to build a canal here!?"

"Didn't I tell you? I truly appreciate this rescue."

The gray-haired dirty old man was entirely nonchalant about it.

Before proposing an idea, Quenser thanked god that his commander was a busty, silver-haired beauty.

"Really though, if we have the Baby Magnum drag around a wire-attached bucket like it's trolling for fish, it can dig up the seabed and create a route out to sea pretty easily. The real problem is the beach where something so inexact wouldn't work."

"Stop working your brain for this piece of shit, Quenser. We're not the Capitalist Corporations, so don't turn into a goddamn wage slave."

A makeshift barricade was crudely placed around the beach and Legitimacy Kingdom work vehicles were already driving around within it. Instead of cranes or diggers, they looked more like armored vehicles and tanks with those parts added on.

Heivia gave an annoyed look to the Holy Sword: Shitty Shovel he had pulled out of the beach.

"You've gotta be kidding me. Our military still hasn't automated this kind of thing?"

"Weapons always have a manual step, so they never fully hand over control. A machine can't be legally responsible for its actions, so whoever's in charge would get in trouble even if it's all automated."

"But tankers and cruise ships are automated to cut down on labor costs. And the navy isn't much different. Not to mention spy drones and bombers. If the sea and sky are going the unmanned route, why is the land alone so untouchable?"

But Quenser was interested in something other than their diligent allies.

Something thicker than a firehose descended from the battlecruiser's deck to the beach and then continued on past the barricade.

The student stared curiously up the 9 meters to the deck and asked about it.

"What's that?"

“Oh, that. The ship’s diesel engine has better fuel efficiency when it is kept on at all times instead of switching it on and off for every little thing. But that would be a waste of energy, so we are sending the engine’s excess power to a local village. So soon after a cyclone, they are very thankful that they can make breakfast without waiting for the torn power lines to be repaired.”

“…I seriously doubt the black-hearted military would perform volunteer work if they weren’t getting anything out of it.”

“Do not be ridiculous. We are a peace-keeping force established for the purpose of self-defense.” Alfred was saying some unbelievable things. “But to be honest, we wanted to avoid a strained post-disaster environment where the people might relieve their stress by blaming their unexpected guests. We are giving them a treat to ensure our work goes smoothly. Oppressing people with military might is not the only way to cut down on terrorism.”

…The crude barricades which left a lot of openings were apparently part of creating that image. If they strictly kept everyone out of the area, the locals might see it as outsiders occupying their land. Quenser had heard that safe country factories would leave a portion of their walls transparent to allow people to see inside. This probably had a similar psychological effect.

“It’s a metal whale!”

“Hey, can we take a picture of it?”

“Won’t the metal whale dry out if they don’t pour water on it?”

The place was already popular with the local kids. This really showed the Information Alliance’s ability to control people’s minds.

Alfred Silverking waved past the barricade with the perfect smile for a press conference.

“I am sorry you have to work on this so soon after your previous job,” he said to Quenser and Heivia.

“I’d like to complain, but I’d be revealing military secrets if I did…”

“Are you referring to the heroin factories in Mekong? We have been monitoring that. Oh, that poor Faith Organization film industry. They might be the world power most lagging behind when it comes to guiding international public opinion, but once you start relying on dirty money to pay for more CG, you really are beyond saving as an entertainment industry.”

“It doesn’t matter if you know everything about it already! We still can’t say anything, dammit!!”

Meanwhile, that captain, who was old in every way but his sex drive, received a whispered message from one of his young female bodyguards in sailor uniforms. He removed the thick pipe from his mouth and instead took a radio from the woman’s smooth hand.

“This is Alfred Silverking.”

“Commodore, surely you know what it means when you’re receiving a call from someone sent here as a troubleshooter. I apologize for how sudden this is, but we have a problem. Immediately put together a unit for a land-based mission. Quality: a specialization in covert activity. Quantity: even just a platoon would be enough. And give priority to the quality requirement.”

“My ship is part of the navy, you know? Do you know where I could find a witch’s potion to give legs to a mermaid?”

“Is this inept resistance of yours in the middle of an emergency your idea of following the Information Alliance way of life and getting information out of me for free, commodore? That is a shocking level of idiocy, but if you like the idea of being hanged for violating international law, then by all means continue wasting my time. You are the responsible party here.”

“…To be entirely honest, I do not know where I can find such a unit. Do you know the animal that kills the most people in the world? The mosquito. They carry a great many pathogens and kill more than 700 thousand people a year. That is more than crime or war. I apologize for going on and on about this, but none of my soldiers have been vaccinated for malaria or the other diseases found in the Asian jungle.”

“The two sides are working together since you’re shipwrecked, right? If necessary, you can procure some Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. Just hurry.”

“How?”

“The truth is the greatest trump card. Tell them every last one of them will be slaughtered if they get caught up in our problem. Tell them the neighbor’s house is on fire and the direction of the wind isn’t looking good.”

The transmission ended.

The two idiots had a *very* bad feeling where this was headed.

Then the gray-haired dirty old man turned toward them, grinned, and made a suggestion.

“Now then, gentlemen. Which would you prefer: digging out sand with a shovel, or returning to a storm of gunfire on the battlefield?”

Since he was not silver-haired, busty, or beautiful, Heivia reflexively grabbed at the man, so the young female bodyguards in white sailor uniforms knocked him to the ground and thoroughly rewarded him.

Part 2

Outdoor work in Southeast Asia felt like being steamed in an oven to healthily cut out the fat, but Quenser and Heivia were instead guided inside the Flagship 019 battlecruiser.

They parted ways with Alfred Silverking and a young male soldier showed them the rest of the way.

They found a space that seemed far too large for a battlecruiser. It seemed more like a crude ship’s hold from a helicopter carrier or a landing ship. A parasol, a simple table, and some chairs were set up and a girl of about 12 with long blonde hair was enjoying some tea with her legs crossed.

She wore a black military uniform that clearly identified her as not your average soldier and she moved just her eyes to look at them.

“Welcome, gentlemen.”

“…Is *everyone* in the Information Alliance a wannabe S who insists on looking down on people?”

“Heivia, you can’t expect much from these morons. Just be glad we traded that gray-haired old man for a cute girl…”

“Hah hah hah? A cute girl? A cute girl!? Oh, Quenser. Even if I’m being generous, we’re either looking at the investiture for some snot-nosed noble brat or the Island Nation’s Shichi-Go-San festival. This tiny, low-and-inside dead ball is clearly categorized as a little gir- bgwehohhhh!!!???”

He cut himself off with some odd noises because of the teacup full of piping hot tea that the black-uniformed grim reaper had chucked at him without batting an eye. It seemed being stomped on by the skirt-wearing women who had been hand-picked by that dirty old man had not been enough of a reward for this boy. Had he completely forgotten they were inside an enemy warship?

“Now. This high-ranking officer with a sexy and adult body will deign to ignore your adorably nonsensical statement.”

With her legs still crossed, the blonde girl held another cup out toward the empty

air. A butler-like young man poured her some new tea. Without even looking in his direction, the little girl…no, the girl…no, no, the beautiful woman…no, no, no, the super sexy widow…no, no, no, no, there is simply no getting around the fact that she was a Rank AAA little girl. And she gestured toward the other seats with her chin.

She seemed to be telling them to take a seat.

“I am Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. I specialize in troubleshooting for the Information Alliance military. I don’t know if it is meant as a compliment or an insult, but I am known as the Stopgap Grim Reaper. I honestly would rather not have anything to do with you for long, but let’s try to work together for the time being.”

“We’re…wait, can we give our names, Heivia?”

“You just gave mine! Th-then again, giving our name and rank shouldn’t be a problem.”

Wraith sighed lightly at their exchange.

“Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage and Private First Class Heivia Winchell.”

“Uhh?”

“You have a thing for feet and you have a thing for armpits.”

“Uhhh!?”

“Don’t let this surprise you, you innocent fools. We are the Information Alliance.”

The blonde girl provided an explanation that may or may not have had further implications.

Now that their fetishes had been exposed, Quenser and Heivia nervously took their seats as if a giant power saw had been moved up between their legs and stopped just before reaching their balls.

“So, um, what would you like to discuss?”

“I am glad to see you catch on quickly, in your own idiotic way. Sincerity is a virtue. You may have already heard from the commodore, but we have a problem. However, we do not have the ability to deal with it since we are beached here. Since you have crossed the battle line to rescue us, we are all in this together, so I will have the Legitimacy Kingdom assist in resolving this

problem."

The young man waiting behind her lined up a few paper documents on the table as if handing out restaurant menus. They may have used paper instead of a digital format because there was no way of fully erasing digital data.

In what may have been a habit of hers, Wraith needlessly spun a pen in her hand.

"The Information Alliance and Legitimacy Kingdom are currently working together because a beached ship is deemed 'sunk' and unable to operate according to the military regulations and leaving the 205 crewmembers with no ability to fight back would mean letting them die. A truly beautiful farce, don't you think?"

"That just means you're asking us to help because you can't fight, right? What about it?"

Wraith sighed at Quenser's question.

"…What if we secretly did have the ability to fight on land?"

"Huh?"

Heivia frowned at that ominous suggestion.

"As I said, I was sent in after the fact as a troubleshooter." The blonde girl looked annoyed. "So I will admit it took me too long to grasp the situation. …Curse the Flagship 019. The warship was carrying five tanks in its belly. I don't want to protect that dirty old man and his crew, but this is more like a leaked report than an intentional cover-up."

"Why would a naval ship have tanks…?"

"I don't know either. Maybe they didn't want to transport them through the usual routes, or maybe they were on some covert operation that precluded having the Tank 041s show up in the records."

It was a strange thing, but Quenser and the others were inside an unusually large space within an otherwise cramped warship. What was that space?

It was possible the Flagship 019 was more than just a warship sent out as a naval fighting force. It may have also transported armaments.

"I really don't like where this is headed. This unlicensed taxi definitely wasn't headed to a hotel, I can tell you that…"

“Oh, one other thing, my dear idiots. Sorry, but you will have to take this information to your graves.”

“Hold on!! You forgot to ask us if we wanted to hear about it first! Don’t stab us and then apologize!!”

“Yes, but we are the Information Alliance, you see.”

“Curse her… She opened the drawer and then slammed it back shut so we can’t turn back!!”

“As wise and merciful as I am, I will guarantee your silly human rights. Thus, you are free to turn back here, but if you do that, keep in mind that someone outside my jurisdiction will likely add your names to some assassination list or another.”

The two idiots’ eyes bugged out at that, but they were already in the middle of a secret operation. If they said anything they should not, they could easily end up the target of a cross-borders payback operation.

“To get back on topic, the problem is that we have a fighting force capable of moving on the land.” Wraith nonchalantly sipped at her tea. “The request for cooperative rescue work only works in a pressing situation, such as a small submersible being sent to help a sunk submarine where the crew is simply waiting for death as the oxygen runs out. If we have a usable fighting force at our disposal, that condition no longer applies.”

…Of course, there was no way that five tanks could get a 200 meter and 70 thousand ton mass back to the ocean, but that did not really matter. The people back in safe countries who were cramming their noses in the rulebooks tended not to care about the actual on-site situation.

“If our temporary cooperation is abandoned here, the Information Alliance’s Flagship 019 will be blown away by an Object with no way of fighting back. But the Flagship 019’s guns still work. Plus, all those diligent Legitimacy Kingdom pigs are hanging around at point-blank range. If a battle breaks out, both sides will be wiped out before they can escape back to sea. No, in the worst case, your Object’s main cannon could even blow away your own infantry as they flee along the beach.”

“Ugh…”

“…I-I can see that happening. With that violent princess and busty commander in the same deck, anything can happen.”

“I would prefer to avoid a silly battle as well. Calculating out the scope of the damage would be a pain. So I want you to move the five troublesome tanks elsewhere as soon as possible. Yes, I can see it now. The first report on the morning news will be some of that oddly tall and narrow ‘viewer-supplied footage’ that has become so ubiquitous. I expect it would take two hours before any actual reporters with a press badge hanging from their neck arrive on the scene. Make sure you have this done before then.”

Quenser and Heivia understood what she was trying to say.

They might have been fine with helping the Information Alliance with this, but not here and now. They had just finished destroying heroin factories deep in the subtropical forest, so they were not about to start another battle now. If you accepted a cruel convenience store manager’s harsh timetable even once, that would become the norm from then on. They knew for sure their sadistic and busty commander would do that. There was no way they would accept to go on a likely literal death march for the war industry.

And something else bothered them more.

“But doesn’t everyone have some kind of camera these days? Just one person with a cellphone can send that tall and narrow footage to the entire world.”

“We are the Information Alliance. We can suppress amateur witness information, even if they use a civilian satellite service. We can shout fake news or fabricate evidence about the footage having traces of being doctored. If it comes down to it, we can even hit ourselves with a cyber-attack. We create our extreme explanation to compete with theirs. If it comes down to a futile argument between white and black, the people’s judgments will fall into the neutral gray zone in the middle. We can hold it back as long as we are not talking about that media that comes with the title of ‘mass’, which is far more persuasive.”

There was no need to overthink this.

They only had to fire up the five tanks and get them out of here.

Quenser and Heivia only had to act as guards along the way.

“You will find the remnants of an airport 120 kilometers north of here. It used to be an Information Alliance airfield, but we had to abandon it after the Faith Organization demonstrated the advantages of their way of fighting properly and killing diligently. Just get those troublesome tanks to the bunker there. Once things have stabilized, the Information Alliance will put together an operation to recover them.”

“Does that mean what I think it does…?”

“Yes, you would be aware after crawling around the forest destroying those heroin factories. This is a battlefield country, but it is effectively under Faith Organization control. South Asia is a melting pot of Hinduism and Buddhism. And it would be a problem if they destroyed or captured the tanks in transit, since that material evidence could be used as a diplomatic card against us.”

In addition to simple terrain and weather information, the documents lined up on the table listed a few expected enemies and their equipment.

The threats to the Tank 041s were shoulder-fired rockets, anti-tank mines, anti-tank trenches, IEDs made from unexploded ordnance, barbed wire, tanks, attack helicopters, and…

“We would like to demonstrate some Information Alliance-style respect by relying on the data that is your experience in ‘surviving’ such things.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me…”

“The Faith Organization’s Second Generation Coilgun 073 is patrolling at irregular intervals. Oh, and your silly codename for it is the Paper Bikini, I believe. …We would prefer to avoid walking through that area, but we have no time. Find a way.”

“…”

“…”

The two boys fell silent when the memories came flooding back.

Yet it normally seemed like those two idiots would suffocate if they were not constantly talking.

In a way, this was a nightmare on the level of entering a tiger den, snatching up the tiger cub, safely escaping the forest, and celebrating that you would never have to face a monster like that again, just to remember that you had dropped the car keys in the depths of that cave.

However, the clock was already ticking.

If they did nothing, the fuse would burn down and they would be caught in the explosion.

They were stuck between a hellish rock and a hellish hard place.

The only choice with the slightest chance of avoiding bloodshed was to move forward.

“I have one last question,” asked Quenser.

“What might that be?”

“…Has our big boss, Frolaytia, agreed to this joint operation?”

When he hesitantly asked, Wraith Martini Vermouthspray elegantly returned her teacup to the saucer.

Then she crossed her slender index fingers in front of her adorable lips.

While forming a small X in front of her mouth, the blonde girl gave him a somewhat upturned glance and asked for something unbelievable.

“This will just have to be our little secret.”

Part 3

And after all that…

“This is the worst,” someone groaned. “We only have two options here: die from a bullet or die from overwork…”

They were in a thick forest, but there was no solid ground below their feet. In fact, the seawater rose about halfway up their calves. This area was known as a mangrove. That meant it had worse footing than a normal forest, it was extremely hot and humid, and they could not even sit down to take a break.

Long ago, people had built cells that entirely ignored the captive’s human rights. The water cell had submerged the floor so the captive could not lie down and sleep while the Sisyphean cell had forced the captive to walk endlessly around and around in the small space by passing a long stick through the bars and prodding them whenever they stopped moving. Those nightmarish rooms had destroyed the captive’s mind through physical exhaustion, but marching through a mangrove without any rest was quickly reaching that level.

It was hellishly hot and humid, but they were surrounded by non-potable

seawater. And even if they got desperate enough to try to cool off in the water, the osmotic pressure would still wear them out on the cellular level. This was the environment through which five masses of steel moved slowly in a line. It was an incredibly difficult route that kept switching between land and waterside, but the tanks managed to remain exactly the same distance apart.

Tropical mangroves were the perfect fit for the effects of global warming, so they seemed to have been taking over the landscape quite quickly. The greenery had swallowed up fighter jets, transport helicopters, and the like which had been shot down by an Object's lasers. They could feel their balls shrivel up when they thought about how many small shrimps and crabs had to be living all through here.

"Are these those self-driving vehicles that are so popular lately?"

"Huh? Well, that does sound like something the Information Alliance would like."

The tanks were clearly maintaining a walking pace so that the infantry like Quenser and Heivia could be positioned around them as guards.

"What the hell is this? There's something wrong with placing flesh-and-blood guards around something with composite armor over a meter thick. What are we, a meat cushion used to protect that metal fruit?"

"I'd rather be here than out front. The ones who lost that game of rock-paper-scissors are taking the lead to make sure the tanks don't trigger any tripwires or landmines, right?"

"So how far have landmines evolved these days, anyway?"

"I dunno. I've heard a lot of stories though. Like landmines that fly up into the air and fall right on top of the tank, or landmines that inform a remote operator when triggered and that operator uses video footage to confirm the presence of enemy soldiers before detonating it."

"What happened to *land*mines being something buried in the ground…?"

"There are apparently also landmines that have something like a parabolic antenna on the ground which automatically turns its head to target the side of the tank. Just like a concave mirror, it focuses the blast on a single point to launch the blast like a spear and pierce the armor from dozens of meters away."

The weight settings for an anti-personnel mine and an anti-tank mine were different, so they would not explode if a person accidentally stepped on them. …

But to reiterate, this was a mangrove with seawater covering everything. Even at a depth of a few dozen centimeters, the water pressure could add enough for a person's weight to trigger them. And if the mine was made from glass or plastic, the metal detectors attached to the end of their rifles could not locate them, so they had to be super careful.

"Have we wandered into a post-apocalyptic world? The greenery has swallowed up all these weapons…"

"It only takes a few years for this to happen. That goddamn Oceanian forestation tech seems to have been profitable. Although that dictator said he couldn't trust some words on paper, so he didn't sell them the Object tech along with it."

Unlike direct sunlight, this was the same stuffy heat as a plastic greenhouse. Heivia was completely sick of it and wiped away the sweat dripping down his chin.

"We're doing our jobs and protecting the battalion from a threat, but our busty commander is never gonna see it that way. Will she just think we're skipping out on our sand-digging job?"

"The focus right now is on preventing this information from leaking out, but we'll just have to hope that little Wraithy will explain everything once this is over."

And since the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance were working together at the moment, this would not qualify as disobeying orders and deserting…or so the two idiots hoped.

The tanks in question – the Information Alliance seemed to call them Tank 041s – had been hastily painted with Legitimacy Kingdom-ish camouflage, but anyone who knew what they were doing would quickly notice something was wrong. The tanks did not look like a crude collection of straight lines. The body and rotating turret had streamlined curves that flowed front to back and it was designed to stay low to the ground. It made Quenser think of a sports car or the front car of a high-speed train.

They had to get those tanks to the remains of some airfield.

He made a comment while glancing over at the tank which was covered with small boxes about the size of a phonebook.

"I guess not even a tank can just knock down all the trees in its path."

He received a clear voice transmission from the tank right next to him.

"Even if they're masses of composite armor, they still weigh a few dozen tons

each. It would probably be simplest to think of them like giant trucks. They smash through concrete walls in movies, but they can actually be stopped pretty easily. And when you do have to force your way through a barrier, you need to point the gun backwards so it doesn't get damaged."

"Who are you?"

"Oops, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Dorothea Martini Naked. Nice to meetcha☆"

The two idiots exchanged a glance.

"…Martini?"

"We've heard that name before."

"Yeah, we're…y'know, a part of that standard. The Martini Series," said the voice. "Although I don't recommend looking into that too much."

This sudden operation existed outside normal operating procedures and it seemed to have some hidden connections to things they were not aware of. To sum it up, they had nothing but bad feelings about this.

"(Umm, have we been set up in some way?)"

"(That's just how the military works. You're either tricked by the enemy or caught in some conspiracy by an ally. It can come from the front or the back, but you get fucked either way.)"

Diesel exhaust filled their lungs along with the salty and muddy scent while Quenser and Heivia felt less than hopeful about the fate of the derailed train that was this mission.

Even the radios they carried felt different.

They had left their Legitimacy Kingdom format radios and handheld devices at the Disaster Rescue Base on the beach, and they had been given Information Alliance format ones instead. Everyone's cute Wraithy claimed it was a way to prevent an intelligence leak, but everything looked suspicious once you entered that mindset.

Dorothea did not seem to mind.

"Man, it's been a while since I worked in a group. It's kind of exciting. And if I'm enjoying this, I guess I'm still not a true shut-in. Thank goodness I'm normal☆"

“Yeah, I’m sure it is enjoyable when the tank drives itself. Can’t you at least let us ride on top?”

“Every surface is covered in reactive armor to make sure an affordable $69.99-a-pop rocket can’t blow away a $9 million tank, so that would be a lot like sitting on top of a pile of anti-personnel mines. Ours are so sensitive they’d probably go off, but feel free to try.”

“Eeeeeek!?”

“Hm? Wait, it’s been a while??? Aren’t tanks run by groups of four or five?”

Dorothea answered Quenser’s question by waving the tank’s gun back and forth.

“That’s definitely been the tradition since tanks first appeared on the battlefield and those traditions are hard to break, but these days you can take everything from the driving to the firing control and concentrate it down to a single panel if you use a fiber-optic drive-by-light system. Even normal cars are going to be self-driving before long. It’s true you need some manpower when they break down or get stuck in the mud, but you can deal with that by keeping a movement-assistance suit or work robot onboard.”

There was a hemispherical multi-purpose camera the size of a basketball on top of the turret and there were small and narrow lenses on all sides of the tank, so a single person could control everything.

“Then why do we still use four people in each tank?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know what paradigm the Legitimacy Kingdom uses, but it might be a loneliness countermeasure. Being stuck in a metal coffin on the front line for long periods can be pretty taxing. So making sure there are several people in each one can mean a lot. Of course, here in the Information Alliance, we use a radio or infrared network to chat with each other. Your way is a waste of labor expenses. Nyahoo, Trevor, Magienz, Energy, and Roxeus, my friends on lonely nights.”

More calls of “nyahoo” entered the radio, so that seemed to be some kind of minor slang. Those online people holed up in their metal coffins were far from quiet.

“…Are all of them Martinis?”

“Of course not. We’re not just a dime a dozen, you know? Nyahoo.”

That pointless exchange did not last long.

Whatever they did, they were stuck walking on and on. Plus, they did not have flat asphalt to walk on. They were inside a mangrove forest with a bumpy floor of roots flooded up to the calves with seawater.

Even if they paced themselves properly, they could only march about 40 kilometers in 10 hours. And these Legitimacy Kingdom scumbags would put in any amount of work toward getting out of doing work, so there was no way they were just going to keep going like this.

“Hey, Quenser, it’s time to get creative! We can’t let them do this to us, can we!?”

“Not a chance. Okay, let’s grab some stuff from that moss-covered fighter. Its low-pressure tires are still intact. Then we’ll borrow the winch wire from that transport helicopter.”

“What about the crucial cart?”

“Won’t that broken main wing work?”

They could not ride on the tanks since their reactive armor was not much different from anti-personnel mines, but that just meant they needed to build a wheeled sled and have it pulled by a wire.

“Why are you two working up a sweat just to skip out on work?” asked Dorothea.

“I’m willing to do anything if it means taking it easy. Okay, Dorothea. You’re our cosplay reindeer crawling on all fours, so drag around this cruel Santa’s sleigh while we mercilessly whip you.”

That changed the nature of their journey.

If they ignored the diesel exhaust in the face and seawater raining down on them due to the lack of a mudguard on the treads, it was not that bad a ride. And it was sure to shorten the travel time. They wanted to finish this before the day was out.

“Yeehaw! Go, go! Whip, whip! Wah hah hah!!”

“…A-are they tormenting my butt in their imagination just from looking at the back of the tank? They don’t even know what I look like yet…”

Just then, something changed.

The deep roar of the powerful diesel engine suddenly stopped. But even if it had stopped moving, the tank’s flame had not gone out. It was for emergency use and

only lasted about half an hour, but it had a fully electric mode. The idiots had not thought to add a brake to their cart, so they very nearly crashed face-first into the back of the tank. It sounded silly, but they very nearly blew themselves to kingdom come.

Also, all the chatter on the radio had suddenly vanished.

Something slowly filled their vision within a silence so great that the chirp of a bird was enough to make their hearts pound.

The giant mass was over 50 meters tall.

It was the Faith Organization Second Generation Paper Bikini.

Heivia just about rejected the truth before his eyes by taking off running, but Quenser grabbed him, got down from the cart, and moved right up next to the closest tank.

“(We’ll be killed! These metal coffins are useless against an Object!! They’re nothing but giant metal readings. Once it notices them, we’ll be blown to bits!!)”

“(Quiet down, Heivia!)”

“(We need to escape into the forest!! If we’re gonna try to wait it out, we’re best off far away from any metal readings! That fighter and transport helicopter in the forest were put there by that thing’s lasers, right!?)”

“(Are you stupid? How far do you think we’ve traveled already!?)

It did not seem the Object had a clear lock on them. It was slowly moving from right to left at a few kilometers away, but that was nothing to something the size of an Object. Dorothea Martini Naked had said the tanks could not knock over the surrounding trees, but that thing could likely plow right through the mangrove with no issue whatsoever.

It was the Paper Bikini.

It had a unique silhouette with the 50m spherical main body contained between diamond-shaped air cushion floats that looked like diagonally-flattened rectangles. It had a main cannon on either side, but they were not aimed forward. The ridiculously-huge coilguns covered the 180 degrees to the left and right.

Instead, it had two thick pieces of shield armor on the front.

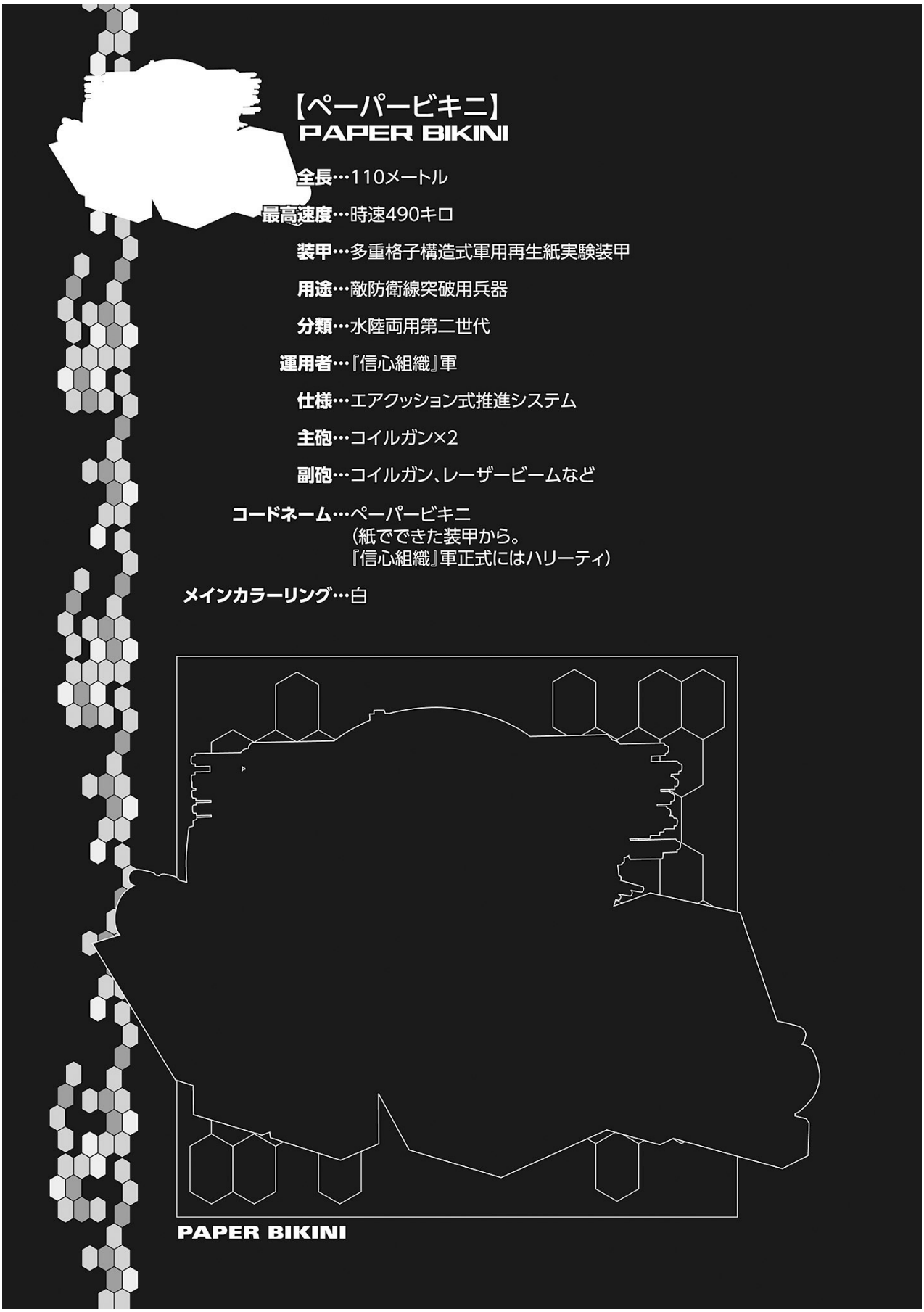
Quenser groaned a quiet comment as he recalled what each part did.

“(The front is only used for charging forward. That Second Generation breaks through the barricades to move deep inside enemy territory before spraying gigantic shells everywhere.)”

“(That thing takes mobile weapon tactics back to the First World War. But it’s managed to use that to survive in this harsh age, so you can’t really criticize it either. You can’t exactly call those old methods smart, but if we’re caught, we aren’t going to get a pleasant death.)”

However, its most defining trait was not its shape or tactics. That would be the material used to make it: paper.

That might be hard to believe, so let’s say it again: paper.



Objects were usually colossal masses of metal, but the Paper Bikini had been

designed out of paper. In ancient times, a powerful Asian empire had used phonebook-thick bundles of paper to make armor. This was likely a similar concept.

It was the ultimate form of the shock-absorption and dispersion found in bulletproof jackets made from aramid fiber, glass fiber, or spider silk. The main cannon was a coilgun created by placing lots of electromagnets inside a cylinder given sufficient strength by combining hundreds or thousands of bulletproof papers. Even the shells were 750kg masses hardened with a special adhesive and given a pointed tip for a cone shape.

A single idea could change paper's durability and other traits. For a close-to-home example, cardboard had caused something of a revolution. Similarly, the Paper Bikini was attempting to overturn the standard tactics by using a multi-lattice structure that was also being researched for the folding of tiny carbon nanotubes.

In the previous battles, the Princess had torn away the Paper Bikini's armor a few times.

And yet here it was good as new.

It had an overwhelming advantage when it came to the cost per gram of armor. Melting down paper and remaking it was a lot more efficient than melting down scrap metal and reusing it. So as long as its reactor was not destroyed, it could replace its armor and return for a rematch. In addition to its simple combat specs, it placed financial pressure on its opponent as an economic strategy designed for the coming Age of Starvation.

"(So it's a paper swimsuit that can never be removed, huh?)"

"(It pisses me off how that busty commander's naming sense is so damn good only when she can be so malicious.)

The Faith Organization's official codename was Hariti.

Since that name came from Buddhism which taught reincarnation, it had likely been designed as an Object made from reusable parts. Standard Objects used steel mixed with a powerful heat-resistant and reactive material, but overuse of that could easily lead to wars fought over the iron ore itself. Once that happened, the technology to build more Objects from a replacement material – especially one that could be replenished in a few years instead of the thousands or tens of thousands of years required for petroleum or mineral resources – would become a trump card against the world. And that was a realistic value for a selectively-bred mangrove.

Also, international society watched for secret Object constructions by monitoring the iron ore trade. Since paper was not monitored, it could slip right past those watchful eyes. That was another way the material could appear quite attractive.

“(No, I can’t take it anymore! If we stick with these old-fashioned tanks, we’ll be turned into some twisted piece of artwork along with all the melted metal! We need to go hide in the forest!!)”

“(Wait, that would work against us!! The Object’s thermal sensors don’t work with all the heat and humidity trapped in the mangrove. It’ll find readings of above 40 degrees everywhere, so it can’t detect human body heat!)”

“(What about the metal readings!? One look at the radar screen and we’re screwed!!)”

“(How many abandoned masses of metal do you think crashed here or were abandoned in the mud? Listen, stay here. Don’t even think about moving. It’ll overlook us if it thinks this is just a rusted hunk of metal.)”

“(So we just have to pray and hope for the best!? When we’re up against the Faith Organization!? Are you sure this isn’t their way of spreading their religion!?)”

“(It might have anti-personnel sensors, but it’s a Second Generation. If we stick by the tank, it won’t be able to tell us apart. When blowing up those heroin factories, twenty of us huddled together to create a rectangular mass it mistook for an abandoned vehicle, remember? Whereas if we run into the forest, the anti-personnel sensors will pick us up individually and it’ll grow suspicious. Then it’ll fire a shot ‘just in case’, blowing us all up in the process!)”

They could not use their radios to ask Dorothea and the others in the tanks why they had stopped, which only made their hearts pound all the harder. Quenser and Heivia had their idea, but Dorothea’s group might have a different one. If they screwed up their cooperation and the tanks suddenly started moving, the two idiots could easily get crushed by the treads.

They waited and waited as the sticky and rusty smell of steel and motor oil filled their lungs.

The beating of their own hearts was far too loud for their liking.

Their faces were soaked with sweat as they continued praying to some formless higher power.

And…

And…

And…

Finally, the Paper Bikini continued on to the left.

This action may have held no real significance for the Object.

The Paper Bikini, with its spherical main body held between diamond-shaped propulsion devices, had not noticed them, so it was simply continuing along an irregular patrol pattern that prevented anyone from predicting its course or timetable.

But to the puny humans clinging to the surface of the earth, it felt like the end of a herculean task. Even if their opponent had never even recognized them as an enemy.

They waited a lot longer to make sure that giant form had entirely vanished while restlessly moving its main cannons back and forth. Only then did a signal return to their close-range radios.

“Forward. Resume moving forward. We’re going to switch back to diesel, so move away, everyone. We do have anti-personnel radar to prevent that sort of thing, but the self-driving mode prioritizes the terrain. Make sure the treads don’t catch the bottom of your uniform.”

“Y-you have got to be kidding,” complained Heivia while wiping sweat from his brow. “How long do we have to keep playing this deadly game of Red Light, Green Light?”

Nevertheless, they seemed to have concluded that the threat had passed. The danger had shifted down to low gear, giving them a short interval to calm their body and mind before the next threat. Or so they assumed.

That was naïve.

A moment later, dry gunshots shot out from the depths of the mangrove.

Part 4

It was likely a short burst of fire from an assault rifle.

Since they fired without any kind of warning, it was likely the pilgrim soldiers of the Faith Organization who would patrol and proselytize simultaneously.

“Oh, crap!?”

They did not know the size or location of the enemy group. But as he ducked down and moved up alongside a tank, it was not the immediate enemy on Heivia’s mind.

“If this causes a commotion, the Paper Bikini will be back! We need to take them out fast!!”

He raised his rifle which had various sensors attached, but then he clicked his tongue. The thermal reading was useless thanks to the high temperature and humidity and the microwave anti-personnel radar was useless thanks to all the trees in the way. But he could not complain either since this was exactly why the Object had overlooked them.

“Warning to 5 o’clock. We’re about to move, so make sure you aren’t caught in the treads. We’ve shut off the anti-personnel radar safety feature, so try not to get killed by the self-driving mode!!”

“Hold on! If you move, we’ll lose our shield!”

“They’re targeting us with a rocket,” replied Dorothea. “Arr pee gee!”

The tank jerked forward like an inexperienced driver messing up with the clutch. When he saw their wire-attached cart fly his way like a morning star, Quenser frantically got down on the ground. Immediately afterwards, an explosive sliced through the air with a thin trail of smoke behind it. The rocket just missed the back end of Dorothea’s tank and flew into the forest on the opposite side, where a flash of light and explosive blast erupted out. Even if they could be made into Object armor, trees were only trees. That sounded somewhat philosophical, but no amount of pondering would change their physical durability.

No complaints or objections were being accepted.

They must have decided they would get hit by friendly fire if this continued for long because the suntanned Faith Organization soldiers broke through the smoke and emerged from the blown-up trees.

However, they were out of luck because those were not school swimsuit tan lines and because they were not girls.

“You sons of bitches!!”

Heivia hopped to his feet. He grabbed at a stubbly middle-aged man’s bayonet-equipped rifle, yanked it from the man’s grasp, dropped it to their feet, and grabbed the man’s collar. He then swung the man around and tossed him into the side of Dorothea’s tank which was turning nearby.

The enemy soldier’s back hitting the tank’s body triggered a reaction in the phonebook-sized boxes covering the surface. More and more of the pressure-activated reactive armor erupted, splitting the Faith Organization soldier’s torso in two along with the bulletproof jacket he wore.

“Blowing the enemy to pieces is fine and all, but try not to rupture their stomach and intestines!” complained Dorothea. “Now my ride is covered in puke and shit! Show some respect for this ultimate luxury vehicle loaded with the world-renowned Rosenkavalier engine!!”

“Oh, shut up. We’re risking our lives out here!! And we need support at 5 and 9 o’clock!!”

“Aye, sir.”

Instead of the tank’s gun, the heavy machinegun near the hatch at the very top of the turret began turning on its own like a telescope pursuing the stars in the sky. Unlike the self-driving tank, this part lacked the accuracy of a clock’s hands. Dorothea was probably letting the program control the driving while she focused on this shooting game. The turret-style heavy machinegun fired bullets thicker than a human thumb at a rate of 2000 per minute. A horizontal sweep of full-auto fire made short work of the mangrove trees along with the enemy soldiers hiding among them.

The initial surprise attack could be fearsome, but once the tank survived primetime and recovered, a group of infantry was not a threat. Even if the soldiers gathered at a distance, an explosive shell could finish them off. And if they tried approaching, the heavy machinegun could push them back.

There was only one real concern.

“Ah!” shouted Quenser while needlessly sitting in the shallow water.

An enemy had covered his face and limbs with his allies’ blood and hid among the corpses, but now he stood up. He was targeting the tank and he held something shaped like a spindle or a rugby ball. It was probably a spare anti-tank rocket warhead. After the gunner was lost, he must have been holding onto it and

waiting for this chance. Heivia noticed and fired his assault rifle, but the man did not stop even after being shot in the back. He made the final step and collapsed in something of a tackle against Dorothea's tank.

Dorothea spun the turret around to face the opposite direction of the attacker.

The electric fuse on the tip of the rugby ball was triggered, an explosive blast burst out, and the Faith Organization solider was blasted in the opposite direction.

"Noooo! Not more gore!"

"Hey, um…are you okay?"

"The reactive armor scattered the blast, so there wasn't any armor damage. Whether it's a rocket, a missile, or an anti-tank mine, all tech generally focuses the blast onto a single point to form a metal jet. As you can see, I protected the gun which is the most delicate part."

"…That armor isn't that convenient. You can only use it once, so another attack to the same spot will break through the armor."

"Yeah…ta ha ha. And clothing damage isn't exactly sexy when it's on a tank."

"You just need the container, a thin metal panel, and a plastic explosive to attach to the underside of the box, right? I can set back up the lost scales for you."

That charge had apparently been the last.

That said, they had fought a battle and caused plenty of explosions. If they did not do something soon, they would be helplessly exposed to the Paper Bikini's cannon fire. They would be killed by that colossal experimental weapon meant for the coming Age of Starvation.

"What exactly do we do now? If we just move from here at full speed and hide below the tree branches, do you really think they'll overlook the tanks? They're pretty big, if you hadn't noticed!"

"We can't hope for that, but let's use everything at our disposal."

"?"

"The Paper Bikini is definitely the biggest threat, but there's only one of it. Its coilgun main cannons are made for firing directly horizontally, so they shouldn't be able to fire extreme long range shots along an arc."

Quenser focused on the radio he had borrowed from the Information Alliance.

However, he was not going to speak to the tank right next to him.

“Dorothea, connect this cheap radio to the Flagship 019. Use the tank to amplify the signal.”

“Hey, long-range is a really bad idea,” warned Heivia. “The Paper Bikini will detect it!!”

“Fine, but what are you going to do?” asked Dorothea.

“Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. You said you specialize in troubleshooting, right? I want some help from the Stopgap Grim Reaper.”

It was a bit staticky, but he was connected to the other Martini girl.

“Diligent sewer rats,” replied the blonde girl wearing a black uniform. “There is not much I can do, but I will hear you out.”

“You sure are acting full of yourself when there isn’t much you can do, my tiny little kitten. The Paper Bikini has its eyes on us, so I want to give it a higher priority target. Simply put, send out an aerial bombing drone or something and cause a flashy explosion somewhere else entirely.”

“Most people would not want to give a lecture to such a smug moron, but fortunately for you, I am a kind young woman: like hell we can do that, newbie. Do that and the Object will register the beached Flagship 019 as an enemy and target us. Have you forgotten we need to put on an internal and external show of how directly and continually helpless we are on land?”

She was blunt.

But just like an expert at restructuring failing corporations, this expert troubleshooter was not just telling the soldiers on the scene to die.

“So we will send a powerful directional signal out from the ship. It will be encrypted, so it can just be gibberish. An honorable fool will assume there is a secret-filled Information Alliance base using an antenna to receive some kind of important intelligence. The best way to lay a trap has always been to trick the enemy into thinking they can accomplish something praiseworthy. Like a tablet inside a bomb-resistant case or wiring together a sealed ammo case and a landmine.”

“I see,” said Quenser while nodding despite speaking over the radio.

“Now, where should we send it?” asked Wraith.

The boy glanced toward the tank’s lenses which had just made small whir.

“Let’s avoid any villages or access routes people use to travel. Oh, I know. Use coordinate 2282-5465. That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Understood. I’ll trust your knowledge of the land after going around blowing up those heroin plants.”

Part 5

The Princess was utterly bored.

The Legitimacy Kingdom was assisting the warship that had been beached by the storm, but that left nothing for the Object to do. However, without the Object staring it down, there was a risk of the ship’s guns making a surprise attack.

Thus, she was stuck on standby.

“Ahh, ahh. I want to get some exercise.”

The Princess’s privileged comment would have received a flood of hostility from the potatoes digging on the goddamn beach had they heard her. Regardless, this meant it was time for some seated stretches inside the perfectly air-conditioned cockpit.

…That might sound like neglecting her duties, but she would not do anyone any good if she succumbed to economy class syndrome before the battle even began. Her chair had a massage function, but that was far from perfect and it was recommended that she do some calisthenics when she had the spare time.

She reached for the thick manual stuck beneath the seat.

“Let’s see… Remove the seatbelts and shift your butt in front of the seat.”

Her small butt slid forward.

“Place your head at the bottom of the seat back. Lift your legs up higher than your head and move them like pedaling a bicycle. One, two, one two…”

Just then, she received a call.

Plus, it was a video call and her little butt was sticking up right in front of the face camera.

“Princess, we have an emergency ca-…oh, dear.”

“Eek!!!??? D-do you need something?”

“Um, well, uh…no, no, you can stay like that. …Now, where did I put that emergency counseling number? Thrill seeking through exhibitionism was certainly not the route I expected from her…”

“No, wait! This isn’t bizarre behavior brought on by excessive loneliness! Don’t call the counselor, Frolaytia!!”

Part 6

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray looked highly sadistic, but (as long as she could use you as a pawn) she apparently did not completely throw out her kindness. She must have done her part because the Paper Bikini moved elsewhere and the tank unit was not exposed and slaughtered.

“I’m starting to think being on their side wouldn’t be all that bad. Being a New Yorker sounds kind of nice, doesn’t it?”

“Heivia, that’s got to be some brainwashing using the suspension bridge effect or the exhaustion effect. Look at this rationally, compare the size of their boobs, and you’ll remember just which commander is better.”

However, they had lost some of the carts attached to the backs of the tanks due to the infantry battle with rockets flying everywhere, so the infantry had to take turns walking and resting. Well, that or get into fistfights over who got a spot on the surviving carts.

Then they heard a cute grunt of effort.

They looked up to see the hatch at the top of the tank turret open up. The person who climbed out was a small girl using a barrette to keep her red hair back in a pineapple shape.

“Uhyah. Man is it hot out here. I’m sweating already…”

To prevent hearing loss, she wore something like airtight headphones over her ears. She also had a different small earphone and a wireless mic on her throat, but she was not wearing any sort of helmet.

For that matter, she was not wearing a jacket and she was not wearing pants or a skirt either.

They were on the front line, yet she was wearing nothing more than a white blouse and panties. Her outfit was blatantly just sleepwear.

“Both her thighs and navel are exposed!? Are you a legit shut-in who’s forgotten what day of the week it is!? Just how casual are you taking this!? From this low angle, it’s impossible to miss those blood-orange side-string panties!!”

“Nn, hh…???”

After a slight groan, she removed the headgear and placed it around her neck with a puzzled look. She apparently had not heard him, but she was able to guess what his question was based on his lip movements.

“Shut up. We need to wash all this gore off my ride before it dries. I’ll give you a bucket, so go get some water.”

Based on her, the other drivers may have been wearing pajamas and negligee too. The boy hesitantly accepted the metal bucket dropped down toward him, but then he found some kind of trash in the bottom.

It was the plastic wrapper for a pack of trading cards.

The cards were from a series meant for a female demographic that anthropomorphized the world’s machineguns and had you build a unit and give them an idol debut. You were meant to raise the sharp-tongued AI characters through their school life in a boys dorm where they would clash with their rivals and solve mysteries at a café afterschool. Quenser remembered hearing something about using a smartphone app to read the code on the cards to reach even further depths in that inescapable quicksand of a game.

(Don’t tell me she’s addicted to this stuff? And is she what the Island Nation calls a fujoshi?)

Just as he started doubting his conclusion, he found something more.

It was a receipt for one body pillow and one bottle of men's shampoo.

(She said something about loneliness countermeasures for when she's alone, but if this is a complication of that 'rotten' disease of hers, her case is really severe…!!)

"?"

Not everyone was willing to be open about their secret interests, so he could not predict how she would react if he was honest here. In the worst case, letting that sleepwear girl – whose blouse was unbuttoned on the bottom and revealing her navel – know what he had seen could lead to her chasing after him in that 50-ton tank in the hopes of running him over and silencing him! Sensing danger, Quenser quickly changed the subject.

"The entire tank is covered in reactive armor, so where do you climb down?"

"Over there or over there," she said while lazily pointing toward the corners of the tank which were likely the hardest points. Quenser used those paths to hold the seawater-filled bucket up as an offering to the pineapple-haired girl.

He had fulfilled her orders perfectly, but she still seemed irritated.

"Ohh, this is just the worst, the worst, the *worst*… I normally wouldn't want seawater anywhere near my precious ride…"

"Shut up, you're the one that was driving it through all this seawater covering the mangrove!"

"If we start driving again like this, you'll get all the gore right on your heads as you ride your cart. Are you sure you want that?"

The potatoes groaned and gagged as the pineapple girl's words quieted them down. They could not exactly complain when they had done this themselves.

"This is the latest product of Rosenkavalier, a status symbol for the wealthy the world over. Its elegant form manages both a low hit rate and excellent aerodynamics. Plus, the engine provides both quick bursts of speed and high horsepower! Let the rumble of the engine intoxicate you! Well, I doubt some fancy-pants Legitimacy Kingdom nobles would understand when you people are happy in the back seat of something as overly-long as a dachshund and only worth a million bucks. Tanks are doing battle in a world worth ten times as much."

“Then why don’t you go ahead and paint that lame penis logo on the front of the tank!?”

“P-penis…!? (blush)”

“What else is that curved thing supposed to look like!?”

It was actually based on the tower card in tarot and represented the company’s constant vigilance to make sure they never grew arrogant even when they stood at the top of the world, but that did not really matter here.

“There, I’ve finished replacing the reactive armor. That should make up for what you lost.”

“Th-thanks so much. Oh, you even got the color right so it doesn’t stand out. It loses points for not being the maker’s official product, but I still appreciate the effort☆”

“It really only needed to function properly, but once I got started, I felt my modeling spirit beginning to burn.”

“I know just what you mean.”

For the paint, he had used the kit meant to apply makeup to the face, hands, or anywhere else that stuck out from the camouflage. Everyone might have forgotten by this point, but those idiots had just returned from a serious job where they hid deep in the forest and blew up heroin factories. …This seemed to be a world where actual effort only made things worse for you.

“Okay, if we’re done sunbathing, let’s get back to work. I’m headed back down into my workplace.”

“Dammit, I can feel the chilly air-conditioning coming from that open hatch…!”

Their complaints were of course ignored and Dorothea even shivered in her navel-exposing blouse. The difference in temperature seemed to be affecting her. Now that they had washed off the filth and replaced the reactive armor, the girl ducked back into the hatch.

But she forgot to close it.

And that meant the indoor sleepwear girl’s odd comment escaped the confines of the tank.

“Ohh, did you miss me, my blond butler? Huggy huggy.”

(Is she talking to a two-sided body pillow made to look like a sharp-tongued butler?)

“Yes, I know you’re shy, but let’s aim your main gun forward. Hwa ha ha. Don’t cover your face and blush. That thing is impressive enough to show off to anyone.”

(Ehhh!? The tank itself is a guy♂!? Then why have I been working so hard for it? C-come to think of it, little Wraithy had a real butler serving her. She did warn me not to look into it, but what is this Martini Series…!?)

The hatch finally closed.

Had the red-haired pineapple girl noticed her mistake or not?

She once more began driving her prince or butler or whatever. The infantry figured out who got seats on the limited carts and the entirely self-driving tanks resumed their perfectly aligned drive through the submerged mangrove. But eventually, something changed.

“We’re about at the midpoint,” said Dorothea. “We should be reaching the levee soon.”

“We’re only halfway? That’s depressing as hell.”

“Stop complaining when you’re just clinging to a cart. You’re not even walking anymore.”

“It’s like riding on the slow train… Y’know, like when you’ve felt the shaking of the train for hours on end with no real destination in mind.”

“But why would they build a levee here?” asked Heivia.

He was probably asking because building a levee in the middle of this submerged area did not seem very helpful.

“It’s apparently to create a fish reef instead of preventing flooding,” said Dorothea. “Something about redeveloping the zones that were lost due to fires. At least that’s what it says on these online tourist guides.”

“Ehh? You have air conditioning *and* the internet on the battlefield? You really have it made.”

“Oh ho ho. I even have a simple shower and kitchen.”

“I’m really worried by the lack of a bathroom on your list there… I don’t want to hear that a girl like you is friends with drink bottles…”

In the distance, they could see a horizontal row of concrete masses with four legs arranged in Y-shapes.

The mangrove’s trees had thinned out, so they came to a stop right on the edge.

Quenser and Heivia ended their time as summer Santas of the southern hemisphere and circled in front of the first tank to join the other soldiers in investigating things from between the trees.

“Oh no…” Quenser groaned as soon as he gave a look through his binoculars. “Oh no, oh no, oh no! That’s a Faith Organization tank unit. They’ve set up a defensive line.”

“What!? How could they block off our route with such pinpoint precision!? Where’d they get that intel from!?”

They no longer heard anything from the radio.

Dorothea and the other tank operators had apparently shut down the radios to remain silent.

They were about 1.2 kilometers from the levee. The horizontal wall had gaps in places, so it definitely was not meant to hold back any high waves. It was a little hard to tell, but there were tanks waiting behind that wall. Only the turrets stuck up above it while they used the obstacle as a shield.

“It might not just be here.” Quenser thought for a bit. “Little Wraithy shook the Faith Organization for us, but that only changed their order of priority. The Second Generation Paper Bikini left, but it makes sense that they would send their tanks to investigate the combat region. They blocked off all the routes around the suspicious point and we just ran into one of those blockades.”

Would they break through here or send the less-noticeable infantry out ahead to search for a way to sneak through?

“We’ll just have to do this. The blockade will only grow thicker as time passes. Look at them: they only have three tanks and a bit of infantry. We outnumber them, so it would be better to trample them before their friends show up from elsewhere.”

“…”

“Trying to trick them would only make things worse. We might be in a submerged mangrove, but that won’t hide the tanks’ tread tracks forever. Once they start tracking us for real, it’s all over.”

“No, not that,” said Quenser. “What’s that noise?”

He then looked up at the roof of trees over their heads.

The noise of the main rotor had been reduced quite a bit in recent years, so he had heard they could get quite close before you heard them.

In other words, he heard the sound of a rotor beating at the air as a giant attack helicopter passed by overhead.

Helicopters came in many varieties, but this one was relatively short and stout. Instead of reducing its exposed surface area to avoid being hit, it seemed designed to deflect attacks with its thick armor panels. In addition to simple aerial firepower, it may have carried groups of soldiers.

Another attack had begun.

Instead of accurately pursuing a target, the rockets contained in beehive-like cylindrical containers were launched along straight lines that provided destruction over a fan-shaped area.

Quenser stood their helplessly with his mouth agape, so Heivia tackled him at the waist and tumbled along the ground with him.

“Get down!” he shouted. “Everyone, get down!!”

Luck was on their side.

The rockets raining down from above seemed to have their fuses set for an instantaneous detonation, so they detonated on the roof of mangrove branches long before reaching the ground. Thanks to that, the blast blossomed outside of lethal range and the tank armor was not penetrated despite an attack from their greatest weak point: above.

But what about the flesh-and-blood soldiers?

Razor-like fragments of the explosives poured down and their own tanks, which normally acted as their shields, threw deadly stones as their reactive armor detonated erroneously. The carts made from scrap parts were torn apart and blown away and the same amount of damage scattered over the soft and fleshy soldiers.

“That’s an attack helicopter!! It’s a tank’s worst enemy!!”

They could not just lie low and wait it out.

The large helicopter flew in a large circle through the blue sky and was clearly taking aim once more. Plus, the tanks waiting behind the levee of blocks with four legs arranged in Y-shapes began to take action.

The Tank 041s had been waiting in a line, but now they began to move. They broke their perfectly aligned formation and scattered. They had likely switched from self-driving mode to manual driving mode.

While nearly run over by their own side’s tanks and nearly hit by the morning stars that the wreckage of their carts had become, Quenser and the others desperately rolled along the ground in search of safety. And they were well aware safety was nowhere to be found.

The mangrove’s shallow seawater was stained with the red of blood.

A rusty smell mixed in with the scent of salt and mud.

The crabs and shrimp had been acting like docile little animals before, but now they grew energized. They had been waiting for all that nutritious bipedal meat to stop moving.

“Get the injured sitting up and prop them against a tree trunk! Calf height water is enough to drown in! Then gather below the thicker portions of the ‘roof’! Another downpour of rockets in an open area and we’ll actually be directly hit!!”

“No, that ‘roof’ would be in the way,” said Dorothea. “I’m heading out into the open, so give me a smokescreen.”

Just as she said that over the radio, her tank left the mangrove and entered the open battlefield.

The attack helicopter naturally took aim and rushed in toward her, but the other tanks fired smoke and blocked the enemy’s vision.

It seemed modern tanks had anti-air equipment.

The Tank 041s had four vertical missiles located behind the turret.

Quenser just about groaned when he saw the missiles fired upwards with the sound of a champagne cork popping amplified over a hundredfold. They were not just short-range; these were the same missiles as the shoulder-fired variety used

by infantry.

Attack helicopters were probably easier to target than a supersonic fighter, but this one still twisted around and scattered firework-like flares. That was enough for the puny missiles, which looked like two fire extinguishers attached end to end, to fly off into empty air like rocket fireworks.

And it did not end with that failed attack.

Just as the Tank 041s had moved forward, the Faith Organization tank unit at the levee took action. There were a few lights similar to a camera flash.

Yes, a tank's muzzle flash was faster than the sound of it firing.

"Oh, no!?"

Dorothea's tank tried to return to the deep forest while crushing the cart it was dragging, but a shell flew toward it at Mach 5 from a distance of about 1.2 kilometers.

Dorothea immediately released the pressure from the hydraulic suspension to abandon her support and let the tank's body sink down. By effectively ducking, she avoided the first shot targeting the top of the turret. The second shot targeted its gut from a different angle, so she turned the body at an angle – so the shell would hit the solid corner of the rectangle – to redirect the shell upwards while the armor was torn away.

She was not using lasers, EM waves, or some other lock-on medium to detect and predict the ballistic path.

Most likely, this was Dorothea Martini Naked's skill which could not be reproduced by the self-driving mode.

(She did that by eye!? She was only basing it on the sunlight reflected rom the muzzles!?)

Her defensive actions seemed like a superhuman combination of the digital and analog, but it was obvious where the missed shell was headed: into the forest where the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers hid.

"Goddammit!!"

They had agreed to no hard feelings, but it felt like the ground they had been hiding on had been flipped upside down. A rusty flavor spread inside Quenser's mouth and his inner ear seemed to be having issues because he could not get up.

He had no idea which way was up and the shallow seawater blocked his mouth and nose.

“Here’s some information…!! I think…enem…shells…rmor pierc…chemical…get through…armo…so be careful!!”

Dorothea was shouting something over the radio, but no whole sentences were getting through to him. Was that because of the seawater in his ears or had something gone wrong in his head?

“These aren’t anti-personnel rounds! Don’t act like the shockwave alone was too much for you! If you’re gonna die, do it after killing the enemy, you dumbass!!”

Quenser finally returned to reality after Heivia kicked him in the gut. He coughed up all the seawater in his throat and nose.

“Uegh, cough!!”

“This operation has failed!! We can’t continue on!! There are too many injures and there’s an attack helicopter flying around! Dorothea, if you have some extra shells, give them all timed fuses and prepare to destroy the evidence. We just have to make sure no one finds out the tanks were loaded in the Flagship 019, right? File off the serial numbers, get out of there, and blow it up from the inside!!”

“No!!”

But the girl vehemently rejected that idea.

“We have to get these five tanks to the former airfield no matter what. Protect them with your lives! I repeat, protect them with your lives!!”

“Set aside that slender-chinned blond butler in glasses, sleepwear blouse girl!!”

“Sbh!? H-heh hee hee. How did Sir Quenser discover my true form? …No, no!! We can’t! It isn’t about that! We just can’t give up on them!!”

“…Oh, hell.”

Quenser got up and pressed his back against a broken tree trunk.

“Dorothea, you can complain if you like, but what’s the actual situation here?”

“This RTS session is not looking good. The attack helicopter overhead is especially bad!!”

“But what if it was just their tanks?”

“If they think they’re invincible with just their heads sticking up over the levee, they can’t be all that skilled. Unlike a stationary turret, a tank is all about its mobility☆”

“Then get to work silencing them. We’ll deal with that thing in the air.”

Just as he said that, the five Information Alliance Tank 041s left the mangrove forest and entered the open battlefield. If they simply aimed from there, they should not have been able to hit the Faith Organization tanks located behind the levee wall, but…

“Everyone, load explosive shells. Let’s do this!!”

“What!?” shouted Heivia. “Aren’t those anti-personnel!?”

But his complaints did not change anything.

All the nearby potatoes were knocked from their feet by the tremendous noise of shellfire.

Dorothea and the other tanks were not targeting the enemy tanks. They had fired on the levee in front of them. And instead of a single thick wall of reinforced concrete, the levee was made from blocks that supported their weight on four legs arranged in Y-shapes. There was no adhesive or welding. By firing shells that scattered an explosive blast and shrapnel in every direction, the blocks were shattered and knocked from their supports before tumbling back down.

There was no need to crush the tanks themselves.

Their mistake had been taking up a position so close to the levee. Concrete blocks larger than a human head rained down on the long and narrow tank guns, denting and bending those metal tubes.

“Enemies A, B, and C have all taken damage to their guns! The tank unit is useless, or at least not a threat to the Tank 041s. How about the sky? What about the attack helicopter!?”

They had left the mangrove forest for that simultaneous attack. That position allowed the attack helicopter to fly in a straight line and slaughter them all with rockets.

Quenser leaned against a broken tree trunk while holding an Information Alliance radio.

He breathed in and out.

He placed his finger on the button.

But he did nothing.

And said nothing.

“Wait…?”

Dorothea was clearly shocked. Her tank pitched forward in a way impossible for the self-driving mode and then it frantically backed up toward the forest.

“What happened to our deal!? You said you’d do something about that chopper! Could you not come up with any clever plans!?”

“No, what happened to *our* deal?”

Quenser did not back down.

He did not lose sight of the odd feeling he had noticed.

“Protect the tanks with our lives? Get them to the former airfield no matter what? Why!?”

“Did the blood rush to your head after seeing your allies killed!? If the affiliation of these tanks is found out, the cooperative action surrounding the Flagship 019 will be nullified and a point-blank battle between the Information Alliance and the Legitimacy Kingdom will break out. To prevent that incalculable amount of bloodshed, the existence of these tanks must be hidden. Wasn’t this explained to you!?”

“That’s not quite right, Dorothea! There’s no point in hiding them at the airfield when we have a bunch of enemies on our tail! I thought that was a temporary hiding place and the tanks would be picked up at a later date!? That won’t work if the Faith Organization ransacks the place in the meantime!!”

“…!?”

“Besides, if all we have to do is hide the existence of the tanks, there was no need to keep the Paper Bikini from noticing them! If we managed to escape before that extra-large main cannon blew them away, no material evidence would remain!! … What have you gotten us involved in, Dorothea? What secret are these tanks hiding!?”

“This is not the time…!!”

“Then I’ll just wait until you’ve been blown away. The attack helicopter will target the large metal readings first. Since the rockets detonated in the branches earlier, it must not be loaded with proper anti-personnel sensors like an Object would be. If we fall back into the forest and wait for the heat to die down, we can check the scorched wreckage and determine the truth. I’m fine doing this either way.”

“You!!”

“Choose, Dorothea. Which will it be? Tell us now, or have us find out later?”

The approaching footsteps of death reverberated through the sky overhead. They squeezed at the impish girl’s heart more than the ticking of a time bomb.

And…

And…

And…

“Okay, fine! I’ll tell you everything! This is a project using the tanks’ drive-by-light systems to manipulate the number of deaths by self-driving cars in safe countries!!”

The wireless device he had borrowed from the Information Alliance vibrated.

It had received a file via short-range infrared instead of using a military server.

After checking the large attached file on the small screen, Quenser slowly stood up.

“I have your commitment.”

“What are you going to-….!?”

“All tanks, use your smoke!! Make sure you can’t be seen from a distance!!”

In addition to naked-eye sight, the smokescreen spread by the tanks obstructed mechanical cameras and sensors by blocking various media, including electromagnetic, infrared, and ultrasound.

The attack helicopter had three options:

1. Recapture its targets using a different type of sensor.

2. Increase the power of the current sensor to pierce through the smokescreen.

And…

3. Simplest of all, move in closer so its radar waves and IR signal could pierce through the smokescreen.

It was the same as asking whether the same voice could pass through a thin wall or a thick wall more easily. That was the fastest way to strengthen its sensors with no need for extra equipment.

But to move closer, it would naturally reduce its altitude.

And that brought it within reach of the group on the surface.

“What are we supposed to do about that thing, Quenser!?”

“We can reach it once it’s below 30 meters! Even if it has armor panels, an attack helicopter’s belly should be thinner than a tank’s!!”

“30 meters!? The missiles from one of those crashed fighters covered in greenery aren’t going to work anymore! Or are you thinking of throwing a balled up piece of clay at it!?”

“There isn’t time to explain!!”

Quenser shouted back as he pulled a small cooking knife from his survival kit, grabbed a piece of wood floating in the water nearby, and carved something into it with the tip of the knife. Heivia glanced down as if peering at a smartphone, but it was filled with functions and equations that might as well have been an alien language to him.

“Okay, a helmet should work… That just leaves filling it in and adjusting the angle…”

Idiot #1 grabbed a helmet from the ground, filled it with the sand and gravel at his feet, and adjusted the angle. He then attached a thin layer of Hand Axe plastic explosive over the top. For the finishing touch, he stuck a pen-like electric fuse into the deepest part in the center.

There were two varieties of directional landmines: concave and convex.

It worked the same as a mirror. The convex variety would scatter the blast thinly across a wide fan-shaped area. By mixing it with lots of metal balls or something similar, it would become a brutal anti-personnel mine that made short work of all

the enemy soldiers in front of it with a single explosion.

So what if it was concave, like Quenser's here?

Just think of it like a mirror again.

Concave mirrors were made to focus light on a single point.

"Directional mines meant for armored weapons can split the door to an office safe from 30 meters away. And it doesn't matter if that distance is horizontal or vertical."

Needless to say, he already knew what aerial course the attack helicopter was using.

It would be unable to resist the straight line that allowed it to slaughter all five tanks at once.

He only had to toss the helmet to a point on that line.

"Did you think you were safe up there in the sky? It's time a landmine dragged you down to earth, you ruler of the air!!"

A lance of fire shot up as if to pierce the heavens.

Concentrating the blast on a single point produced penetrative power that was normally impossible and that tore through the belly of the attack helicopter and fried every last centimeter of space inside.

Part 7

"Oh, god! My legs are so swollen!!"

She belonged to the same military, but Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had no intention of looking after the beached ship. She dove into a beach chair beneath a parasol and pulled off both her boots and her black pants.

All that remained below were her bright white legs. Either due to the length of her jacket or her professional(?) spirit, her underwear was just barely out of sight.

“Frank.”

While lying in the chair, the blonde girl called over the young man who always served her.

And she spoke as if this was the usual way of doing things.

“It’s time to adjust my performance. Sorry, but could you massage my legs to improve blood flow?”

That was not an issue.

He did not even hesitate.

The young man looked like some kind of machine while he reached for the girl’s soft legs and applied the perfect amount of pressure to massage Wraith’s ankles, calves, and then thighs. He was simply returning the gathered blood up to her torso with movements like someone squeezing sauce inside a plastic container. There was no ulterior motive hidden in the movements of his fingertips and he showed no sign of peeking at the underwear only protected by the skirt-less bottom of her jacket.

“…”

For some reason, Wraith looked incredibly bored.

“Tah.”

So she began gently attacking the young man’s cheek with the sole of her tiny foot.

She tried rubbing the heel against him, but the young man did not respond. He only continued with his work.

That could be seen as an admirable attention to his duties, but the look in the small blonde girl’s eyes moved past anger and arrived at exasperation.

“You really are…how should I put it? A boring guy.”

He did not even respond. They had had this conversation countless times before.

Wraith no longer expected anything from him, so she simply left her body in the young man’s hands and lost herself in thought as if separating her mind from her body.

The first thing that came to mind was those idiots who were like an incarnation of rebellion.

Now *those* were people worth bullying.

“Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell, hm? …Interesting. Hoo hee hee. What kind of nonsense should I make them do next?”

Just as her true thoughts leaked out, something odd happened.

She had not ordered him to, but the silent young man began digging his thumb into the bottom of her foot. Little Wraithy’s shriek echoed across the white beach like someone had stepped on a kitten’s tail.

The young man was this Martini’s bodyguard, but he also functioned as a safety to keep her under control. …*How* each individual bodyguard accomplished this was up to them.

Part 8

The threat of the Faith Organization attack helicopter had passed.

Dorothea had survived, but only after violating military regulations by sending the following file to Quenser:

We ask for assistance in researching the fully self-driving cars which are currently being implemented within safe country cities.

The research in various fields is still underway, but what is ultimately desired is enough experience to qualify as a field test. However, experience on a predetermined circuit or between set hours when traffic is controlled is suboptimal for AI learning.

The world is filled with coincidences and malice.

If a small child runs out in front of the car in a complex downtown area, can it really avoid a collision? Would it mistake a doll or a sign shaped like a child for the real thing and slam on the brakes? Cyber attacks on the program are of course a concern, but will the decision-making program reliant on the GPS map and anti-personnel radar function properly under the effects of powerful jamming?

Can we really eliminate all problems, anticipate all situations, and prevent all incidents of intentional and coincidental accidents?

The answer is simple: no.

Thus, the Information Alliance's Automobile Coordinated Corporate Conference has decided on an acceptable number of accidents. If the number of accidents caused by the implementation of self-driving cars is fewer than the number caused by traditional driver-controlled cars, the corporations can say they improved society and would thus bear no responsibility.

Let us discuss a hypothetical.

If the traditional car culture took 20,000 lives a year, then an identical loss of 20,000 lives would cancel out and leave no responsibility.

…And the same applies if the introduction of self-driving cars reduces the number of accidents by less than 10%.

In other words, the 18,000 deaths leftover are just "excess".

You can say the same thing about the number of people the government or a corporation can get away with killing. Such as the mountains of bodies produced in war year in and year out.

Of course, we will work to reduce the number of deaths.

Taking a program originally used in military tanks and downgrading it for civilian use is one part of that. The vast plains, deserts, and jungles provide much more space to move around in than the complex arrangement of public roads. Plus, the battlefield blesses us with opportunities to test a variety of obstruction tactics such as ambushes, landmines, cyber attacks, and jamming. By repeating field tests here, the driver AI should learn to respond to unexpected situations more flexibly.

Even then, the number cannot be reduced to zero. In fact, it is better this way.

This is a new weapon developed by the military. We are well aware that releasing our "convenient service" will lead to people being killed. More than that, just by messing with the scale on the kind of cold graph seen at life insurance companies, we can wipe out people we dislike. Even entire races or social classes.

We know this, yet we are spreading the technology throughout safe countries.

We wanted to influence the people's opinion of the technology by saying this was a resilient and safe system that had survived harsh military testing and thus the

threat of the manual driving age was over.

That was why failure was not an option on this mission.

They could not afford to lose the hardware inside, so those tanks could not be abandoned.

Also.

The Information Alliance placed price tags on all information and wealth was gathered in the hands of whoever has the most data. This naturally led to giant corporations greedily seeking out, feasting upon, and filling their bellies with the private information of the masses.

As long as the number of accidents remained within the acceptable number, the corporation bore no responsibility. They would still be taken to court or sued by individuals, but it would never go any "higher" than that.

What would happen if this was implemented?

Even in the Information Alliance, there were those who refused to have their data indiscriminately collected. Some people would keep their phone's GPS turned off and wear glasses or a mask that confused facial recognition programs.

But that would mean they were no longer "recognized as human" by the cameras of the self-driving cars.

And that mistake would increase the rate of accidents.

A car might not even brake as it ran them over in the middle of a crosswalk.

The odds of each incident occurring might be low, but that would build up over time and they would be doomed to die eventually. Yes, just like gradually increasing the amount of salt or fat in the food they ate.

An obvious cyber attack would leave traces of the culprit and be treated as a crime, but if it was setup to look like a "malfunction" in facial recognition of the victim, the position of culprit and victim would switch around. Just like someone running out in front of a car, the dead would be seen as a nuisance and the one at fault.

Meaning…

They were building a system where the uncooperative would be killed without the rulers having to lift a finger. The conspiracy would never be found out. The

numbers would look as vague as with carcinogenic materials, but there would in fact be a clear dividing line between who lived and who died.

In that culture, the demon of statistics would bring certain “death by accident” to any who refused to have their data collected.

Everyone else was constantly monitored by mobile wi-fi bases and drive recorders and, if they showed the slightest sign of refusing cooperation, they would be thrown into the category of “accidental deaths”.

“Gh, kh…”

Inside the tank filled with her hobbies, Dorothea Martini Naked curled up and groaned while wearing only panties and a white blouse with the bottom buttons undone.

Now that she had escaped the fear of death, she could appreciate the true gravity of what she had done. But luckily, the radios given to the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers could not transmit a signal very far. They of course had their output restricted to keep them from sending any unnecessary information to the outside world during an operation. Without amplification from the large antennae on the Tank 041s, they could not send anything back to the Flagship 019 or the world at large. And that equipment was borrowed from the Information Alliance. As long as it was retrieved and destroyed, there was no risk of the document making it to the Legitimacy Kingdom military.

She had already been paid.

No, the amount of money the red-haired pineapple girl had did not matter. The question was how much she could make in the future as someone who could greedily gather all that big data. She needed to use this never-drying spring of money.

Even now, chat text was rapidly scrolling by on a corner of the LCD monitor used to display a variety of strategic information. It was a lot like communication in an online game, but the other posters were the other members of the tank unit wearing their own type of sleepwear, be it pajamas, negligee, or whatever else.

“Energy> Nyahoo, what’re we gonna do, Dorothea?”

“Magienz> That was a major contract violation. Now our sponsor is gonna hunt us down and kill us!”

“Roxeus> Respond, Dorothea!!”

“Trevor> You’re the leader. And you’re the one that got us all involved in this business! You started this, so you can’t just throw in the towel now!!”

Her companions were in the same boat, so their advice only sounded like threats that squeezed at her heart.

She tried to think up a way to break free of that pressure.

And there was a simple answer.

Dorothea only had one option that would allow her to walk brazenly through the world once more.

“…They can’t make it back alive.”

Part 9

The threat of the Faith Organization had passed.

Quenser had extra information on his screen-equipped radio.

It was obvious what would happen.

“Get ready, Heivia.”

“Huh?”

“Dorothea’s group is going to try something. I doubt they’ll let us live after this.”

“Wait…what!? When did they become our enemies!?”

The answer was simple.

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance had been enemies from the beginning. Trust and betrayal were never on the table. So it was only natural for Dorothea’s group to slaughter Quenser’s group in order to wipe clean this inconvenient situation.

“Why would you do this, Quenser?” asked Dorothea. “This is about the traffic infrastructure of the Information Alliance’s foundational cities. What does that

matter to Legitimacy Kingdom people like you!?”

“This is a more fundamental problem than war. I can’t just ignore it…”

“We have a $300,000 a year contract!! Until the day we die, we get enough to buy a new cruiser in Miami every year! Do you really think we’re going to throw that out for your silly reasoning!?”

“I suppose I should’ve expected the Information Alliance to get philosophical on the battlefield. You’re all such pretentious intellectuals.” Quenser smiled fiercely with the borrowed radio in hand. “But does scum really need a reason to kill each other on the battlefield, Dorothea? I’m not talking about secret deals or common interests; this is just what war is.”

“…”

He heard an oddly wet sound through the radio.

Had she bit and bloodied her lip?

Or was it a form of laughter no normal person could imitate?

“…Fine then. It’s all-out war then.”

“Let’s settle this.”

“Are you trying to buy time with this? As long as we survive the primetime surprise attack, the difference between tanks and infantry in a pure head-on clash is absolute. You’ll be turned to mincemeat before you can get anywhere close. Would you prefer being blown up by an explosive shell or torn to pieces by a heavy machinegun? The choice is yours☆”

If they were simultaneously locked onto from five direction and exposed to all that great firepower at once, Quenser’s group could not escape. The mangrove forest might be used as materials for an Object, but the tree trunks would just be torn apart if the soldiers tried to hide behind them. And with nothing to provide cover, they would be killed instantly if the tanks began horizontal fire.

If Quenser shaped his explosives to direct the blast, he could indeed pierce through a tank’s belly. But these had reactive armor. He would want to detonate the explosive at least within 15 meters and ideally attach it directly to the armor, but Dorothea’s group would never give him the opportunity. After all, those heavy machineguns could accurately target him from 1000 meters and the explosive shells from five kilometers. He would never get close.

To sum up, there was nothing they could do.

And yet, while there was tension, there was no fear on Quenser's face as he brought the radio to his mouth.

And he spoke with a thin smile.

"I have your commitment."

A great tremor shook the earth.

It of course came from the main cannon of the Objects that ruled the battlefield.

What had happened?

Wasn't it the Faith Organization's Second Generation Paper Bikini that ruled this place?

It was not.

Something massive produced a deep whistling as it spun through the air. A main cannon had been torn off and blown away. Each individual sheet of paper looked thin and fragile, but by gathering thousands or even tens of thousands of them, this giant cylinder had gained incredible weight and shock resistance. And now it mercilessly stabbed into the ground between Quenser's group and Dorothea's group.

The paper main cannon belonged to the Paper Bikini, an experimental weapon that looked ahead to the coming Age of Starvation.

This meant it had been destroyed at some point.

"Wha-…?"

"Had you forgotten? We belong to the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. We maintain and operate an Object. And that means the Paper Bikini was not the only one on this battlefield. Our Baby Magnum was here too."

"But why now…? Your borrowed radios can't reach the Flagship 019 and I doubt that First Generation would leave the ocean and come here for no reason!!"

"Remember the diversion I had little Wraithy set up?" Quenser smiled. "She sent out a powerful directional signal to hint at the presence of a nonexistent secret base in order to distract the Paper Bikini. …But what if there really was a military installation there?"

“Ah!?”

…Now, where should we send it?

…Let’s avoid any villages or access routes people use to travel. Oh, I know. Use coordinate 2282-5465. That shouldn’t be a problem.

…Understood. I’ll trust your knowledge of the land after going around blowing up those heroin plants.

What had Wraith’s trust sent that signal to?

The answer was obvious.

“If a cutting-edge Second Generation suddenly pinpoint targeted a secret Legitimacy Kingdom base, our cute Princess would have to be scrambled and sent out there.”

The rest was a chain reaction.

After heading out and engaging the Paper Bikini in battle, the Baby Magnum would investigate the area and notice any other spontaneous combat.

Even if their signals could not reach the Flagship 019 on the distant beach, the Baby Magnum’s largescale mobile radio base was a different story now that it had moved inland.

Of course, Quenser had not planned this all out from the beginning.

He had requested the initial diversion when they had thought the Paper Bikini had left but the Faith Organization’s pilgrim soldiers had found them and the Second Generation might just come back. He had been hoping to distract that Object and also get the Baby Magnum involved since that was a job for the Princess. That was all he had been thinking initially.

But it had paid off.

He had smelled something fishy, but had not initially found any actual evidence of anything.

But he had not overlooked it and he had persisted to the very, very end.

“She’ll have overhead everything we said here. And since the signal could reach her, she’ll also have the secret data you sent me. Your Achilles’ heel is already inside the Object’s recorder.”

Quenser heard a rumbling like approaching thunderclouds.

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder and gave a smiling announcement.

“If you want to cover this up, then be my guest. Let’s see that precious tank of yours blow away the Baby Magnum.”

Part 10

“Well, that’s one of the worst things I’ve ever heard.”

Heivia groaned when Quenser explained the situation to him after they returned to that metal beached whale known as the Flagship 019.

“A rule to dodge responsibility while accepting the deaths of tens of thousands every year? Downsizing a program from tanks to civilian cars? You’ve gotta be kidding me. Was the Information Alliance trying to start a war that covers battlefield country and safe country alike? Not even a thermobaric bomb takes that many lives at once. That’d be like dropping a nuke on their own country as some kind of yearly event.”

“The physical hardware that holds the crucial research data was inside Dorothea and the others’ tanks. And we had the Princess blow those up after Dorothea’s group surrendered and got out of them, right? That settles everything. They’ve failed to build a ‘safe system’ they can say withstood military testing. And that also eliminated any evidence of ground forces on the Flagship 019.”

“$300,000 a year for life if you cooperate, huh? That’s like winning the lottery.”

“Oh, I’m sure they would’ve been secretly assassinated once all the data was gathered. Agree to pay ‘for life’ and you don’t have to pay a single cent as long as the recipient dies during the first year.”

“Ugh…”

“That world power controls everything via information. You have to expect that kind of loophole abuse.”

At that point, the two idiots fell silent.

They paused.

After a while, Heivia resumed speaking but more quietly.

“It’s hard to say this was really resolved, though.”

“You may be right.”

They had nipped this incident in the bud.

But what if the planners had a second or third seed planted which simply had not reached the surface yet? If the major automobile makers used some other method to implement self-driving cars under the same system, a traffic infrastructure that used the acceptable number of accidents to automatically assassinate the uncooperative would blossom within the Information Alliance’s safe countries.

The rulers need not bother with a cyber attack. If anyone uncooperatively rejected indiscriminate data gathering through drive recorders and mobile wireless stations, the system would automatically kill them in an accident.

“What about that former airbase?”

“The Princess held up another team there. They were probably a retrieval team meant to physically nab the hardware protected by the Tank 041s’ thick black boxes. If we’d arrived at the airbase as planned, we probably would’ve been lined up and shot.”

And as they discussed that…

“Hi.”

Someone called out to them.

It was a blonde girl in a black uniform unsuited for the beach who had a young man standing behind her like a butler. The young man held a duralumin trunk that was probably the tiny officer’s private property. It was the product of a prestigious brand well-known in New York. It was only used to carry luggage, but it had to have cost as much as a car.

This was Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

Tension filled the air like an ominous electric charge, but Quenser held a hand out horizontally to stop Heivia from doing anything.

The young man smiled pleasantly and bowed slightly.

The next thing Quenser knew, the duralumin trunk had fallen to the young man's feet and his hands were free.

He looked like the slender secretary type, but there was something hidden deep in his eyes. And if Wraith was willing to casually approach people armed with rifles or explosives, she must have had absolute trust in the specs of the young man serving her.

Quenser sighed.

"…But does that come from certain 'rotten' interests, or not?"

"???"

Since she looked utterly confused, our cute little Wraithy must not have had that specialized knowledge.

Having found an answer to that question that had been bothering him, Quenser started again.

"I don't envy you your damage control work here. Your project failed pretty spectacularly."

"So it seems. Well, we are the Stopgap Grim Reaper…troubleshooters brought in from outside. To be honest, I'm not all that interested in what happens to the Flagship 019."

A violent and somewhat comical sound followed.

Had it been unlocked or had the lock weakened from overuse? Wraith kicked at the duralumin case that had fallen to the sand at her feet, forcing open the latch. The mass of metal looked solid enough to use as a shield, but that was enough for it to split open like a bivalve. However, it did not contain stacks of cash, bars of gold, classified documents, tropical clothing, or cute underwear.

It contained a shirt and underwear. More notably, this clothing was worn by a lonely old man with his hands and feet bound behind him and a gag in his mouth. He lacked the dignity he had shown when protected by all those young women.

"…Alfred Silverking…"

"The higher ups have decided to keep the chaos to a minimum by firing him, but his subordinates might put up an ill-advised resistance if we took him away right

in front of them. He seemed more interested in enjoying himself than helping the Flagship 019 recover, so I thought I would give the old man some excitement by skipping town in secret."

"How hot is it right now? Will he really survive to the airport?"

While the two frightened idiots watched on, the young man carefully pushed the old man back into the duralumin trunk and closed it once more.

It did not matter that he was also part of the Information Alliance. In fact, it did not matter to them if someone was also part of the Martini Series.

They were probably used to it after all the death and failure they had seen.

"…Oh. So that's what seemed off to me at first."

"Hm?"

"The Flagship 019. It's not a battleship or an aircraft carrier. It's a flagship, so it should be at the center of the fleet. …But isn't that categorization really vague? If the registration on paper is all that matters, you could call a rubber boat or a life buoy a flagship."

"Heh. Hah hah! You're mentioning that now, you adorable fools!? That was an electronic information control ship wearing the skin of a battlecruiser. And I doubt you need to ask what kind of data it was exchanging and gathering in this case!!"

"…"

"Well, you can see how well that turned out. But my job is to troubleshoot these seemingly impossible problems, so that doesn't matter to me. Now, gentlemen, until we meet again on whichever battlefield money and information gather on next. Which shouldn't take long."

That Martini Series girl waved her hand and walked past Quenser and Heivia.

But then something odd happened.

The blonde girl gently took Quenser's hand.

And she whispered to him.

"(To be honest, I was sick of that plan for a civilian assassination traffic infrastructure using self-driving cars. You did a lot to help troubleshoot that

problem. Out of respect for your righteous anger, I will dig up the rest of the seeds there, so you needn't worry about it yourself.)"

And just once, she pressed her lovely lips against the back of his hand.

After that, Wraith Martini Vermouthspray really did leave without looking back.

Between the Lines 1

"Nnn."

While riding a rented urban bicycle, a small girl pressed one slender leg against the ground to come to a short stop in the bike zone in the wide sidewalk. She had her small butt pressed against the bike seat and she raised her arms to stretch. She wore sporty cyclewear and a groan escaped her lovely lips. Despite being in a large metropolis, there was no smog blocking out the sky and the refreshing breeze carried the scent of greenery. Both facts pointed to some unusual city planning.

She had chosen New York for her first long-term leave in a while. The city's people were walking with a bit too rushed of a pace for a vacation, but she had seen far too much picturesque rural scenery in the battlefield countries. This was supposedly her hometown, but she had clearly not visited in a while since all the electronic billboards and AR markers flooding Times Square felt more strange than familiar.

It had been a long time since she had seen her parents.

As her hometown, she knew it well, but the city changed very quickly. She should have gone around doing preliminary research if she had wanted to properly enjoy her vacation with her family. The data in which the Information Alliance found value was not just what was found scattered across the internet.

(I wish I could have had father show me around, but for a New Yorker, he really is clueless about what's fashionable…)

OLEDs were used to place the world's largest flat-screen monitor on a gigantic building wall.

"Gather popular objects and battle the world! Oh ho ho! The app is free to play,

so anyone can enjoy it! 20 billion downloads to date! And a special collaboration with me is currently underway!!”

(That’s more than the population of the earth, isn’t it?)

After watching a sexy G-cup woman winking and reading off the advertisement on the building wall, the small girl sighed and slowly shook her head. She had performed that herself, but the flow and density of data in the Information Alliance was insane in several different ways.

At times like this, it was a lot easier being a VR idol whose motion data was used for a CG model. She could ride around on a bike without a disguise and not have to worry about any kind of trouble. And with her personal information protected at the level of a military VIP, no essentially-unemployed cyber reporter with too much time on their hands or amateur paparazzi for a cheap tabloid could discover her identity.

That was how the world worked.

You wanted to know everything about them while they could not see your true identity. That was true of the president of a monstrously-large IT company and it was true of the charismatic leader of an international hacking group. That was why people were so fixated on social media friend counts, why housewives fought to control the neighborhood discussions, and why bartenders and taxi drivers acted like they knew everything. At the very least, that was the essence of the basic pyramid structure envisioned by the people of the Information Alliance.

New York was composed of five different blocks and its registered population alone was 8 million. Include people there as laborers, tourists, and the like, and there were more than 20 million people there on a daily basis. But even with that many eyes on the girl, none of them realized she was the genius girl who was both an Object Pilot Elite and a top idol. Or that bodyguard men in suits were mixed in with the crowd at important points and that a bulletproof car was waiting to evacuate the girl in less than a minute if trouble arose.

But as much as the girl acted like she knew everything that was going on, there were definitely some things that she “could not see”. The young man selling gelato from a truck may have wanted to hear the voice of a giant IT company president in person, the beautiful woman covered in brand names who walked by may have put too much faith in the power of cards and found herself buried in debt, and the female officer with long silver hair and brown skin who was leaning out from behind a wall may have disguised herself in a lawyer suit and glasses while she writhed in joy with a video camera in hand.

(Hm? Did I just have some kind of strange hallucination…???)

While taking a break, the girl accepted a cup of vanilla gelato with cream cheese and raspberry as extra toppings from the RV food truck and did a suspicious double-take, but there was no one at that building corner. If she was seeing hallucinations like that, her job may have been more stressful than she had thought.

(Now, I think I'll finish going through midtown while eating this and then I can head on to uptown. They do say you could see all the major Manhattan sites in a single day if you really tried.)

She knew things that others did not and others might know things she did not. It was important to keep that in mind. At the very least, this world power was not kind enough to hand success to anyone who thought they were a true genius who knew everything. If you ever found yourself convinced of that in your daily life, it was best to assume some third party was already twisting your life to their benefit.

Your possibilities are unlimited.

Any dream can come true if you keep working at it without giving up.

Not everything is determined by your position in the world. There is sure to be someone out there who needs you.

The small girl thought of those stereotypical platitudes, realized they could all be found in her songs, and grimaced. And not because the burnt caramel sauce gathered at the bottom of her vanilla gelato cup was so bitter.

(Maybe I should punch that lyricist next time I see them.)

Of course, her determination here was hampered somewhat by the fact that her punches were about as strong as a playful kitten's.

And the girl had yet to realize something else.

…That successful lyricist was actually a huge fan of the hard rock band Boy Racer and wanted a lot more freedom in what they wrote, but a certain silver-haired and brown-haired someone (who insisted on being called a creator despite not being a manager or an agent and having no experience in the field whatsoever) had such a sharp glare that the lyricist was only allowed to use those platitudes that were one step away from being a nursery rhyme.

This was yet another good example of how the Information Alliance worked.

You knew things that others did not and others knew things you did not.

Chapter 2: Independent Action Taken as Casually as a Convenience Store Donation >> Domination of the North American Central Demilitarized Line

Part 1

"Welcome to Live News Today. In today's top story, the major search engine Michael & Lucifer is being sued over their satellite image service on the grounds that it violates people's privacy by photographing the heads of balding men and revealing those photographs to the world. The plaintiff demands to have the images of the corresponding region fully deleted as well as $2 million dollars in damages, but M&L's PR division is declining to comment as the official complaint has yet to reach them."

"We always get these direct mail attacks and last-minute lawsuits toward the end of the year, so the year really feels like it's coming to a close once they start up. … Hm, so it's only two months until Christmas, is it?"

"Michael & Lucifer's own user policy says anyone can send in a request for the right to be forgotten if an image shows an identifiable person's private parts or the source of a bodily complex, but will that apply in this case?"

"It's going to be difficult. If this goes through, satellite imagery will never work. I mean, 10% of the world's men are balding and that number reaches 30-40% in a superpower that consumes lots of meat and beer. Eliminate all of them from the map and you might have an entire country turn into a giant black box."

"I see. If it's 10% of the world, it isn't that rare, is it? That would explain why you have such an obvious toupee, Mr. Flake."

"Don't take my male hormones lightly. Do I need to fuck you on the live broadcast to prove it, you slutty anchorwoman? …Ahem. Anyway, Thanks to a past case about some women's underwear hanging out to dry, there is precedent for this sort of suit failing. I am sure their corporate lawyers are…"

A radio broadcast played over a civilian frequency.

Quenser started poking at the top of his head.

“Ehh? That gets to 10% of the guys in the world? Now that’s some scary Russian roulette. No one can just ignore this, but how exactly am I supposed to look after my head?”

However, he was berated over the radio for getting distracted.

And of course, he was not about to get that kind of targeted reward from the anchorwoman who had joined the station solely so she could be around famous celebrities and athletes.

“You still haven’t gotten those strategic support parallel processing machines back up!? How much longer until those geeks from the electronic simulation division stop getting paid from the people’s tax money just for raising their hands!?”

“Oh, shut up. How about saying ‘sir’, Miss Boobs! I’ve been stuck in this minus-twenty-degree refrigerated storage for four hours now! And I’m hand-applying solder to thin silicone chips which we should really be using an electron microscope for, so we’ve kind of lost this war already!!”

“We shut off the refrigeration and kept the door open, didn’t we?”

“Say that again after you’ve been in this energy-saving thermos from hell! Your boobs’ll be even more unnaturally stiff than if they were stuffed with silicon!”

Computers were lined up like gravestones in a frigid hell where you could hammer a nail with tofu, but Quenser was not doing battle with the actual simulation machines there. He was trying to fix the hub that increased the number of data lines. To oversimplify, it was a necessary piece for connecting all the machines in parallel. However, there were a lot of places he had to check with so many devices to connect together. He had to determine which insulated wires were broken, locate which devices had their wiring messed up, and then fix it all. …It all sounded very annoying, but at the most basic level if was the same as a game system’s AC adapter. He had to locate which cord or pin had a bad connection and fix it so electricity could get through. That was all.

The problem was the extreme number of them.

Plus, he was stuck in a room as cold as a snowy mountain during a blizzard while doing work on the level of a watchmaker with a loupe and tweezers.

The actual members of the electronic simulation division were not looking after

their own machines, but that was because they had zapped themselves too many times and nearly blown off their precious fingers. They had listed off a number of supposed reasons, but it seemed to come down to needing their dominant hand's fingers to get through their lonely nights. The main power source was off, but some of the circuit board capacitors still held a more powerful current than a stun gun, so he had to be careful. It felt a lot like disarming a bomb.

But why he was once more caught in the midpoint between the harsh battlefield and engineering hell?

"Have you already forgotten what happened in the Mekong District? You abandoned your duties, did the dirty work of an enemy nation, and then revealed the location of a secret Legitimacy Kingdom base that had spent five years infiltrating the area, forcing everyone there to withdraw."

"I'm never going to escape this hell, am I? There's only one way to make life worth living now: think of the battlefield and all-night work as twin grim reaper girls in nothing but capes so I can imagine having their boobs pressing in on me from either side… Wait, grim reapers? Oh, yeah. I wonder if little Wraithy, the Stopgap Grim Reaper, managed to follow through on that issue…"

The LED on the boxy device in Quenser's hands changed from red to green. It looked a lot like a small radio, but it was a tester that checked for an electric current.

"Frolaytia, I've got it connected again. At the very least, it can carry a signal now. …Tell the nerds from the electronic simulation division to take care of the rest!! Wait, #29 and #31 aren't in order. That's a reverse connection! No wonder this job never seemed to end! Why did I have to spend two sleepless nights searching for someone else's screw up!?"

"Hmm? I have no idea what that means, Quenser, but are you as much of a nerd as-…"

"I'm nothing like those depressing people from the electronic simulation division! I'm cheerful, easy to get along with, popular, and stylish! I'm racing down the path toward being a clever IT expert!!"

"(Well, nerds never can seem to get along. Those freaks and geeks always claim they're different from each other and never stop attacking each other.)"

"Did you say something?"

He was alone, but he still glared into empty space while walking toward the exit in

a heavy coat. To think of it like roadwork, he had only fixed main street and the side streets still needed work, but at minus twenty degrees, he could not even leave an energy drink in there with him. Even for a military punishment, it was a hellish work environment where he was only allowed out in order to consume caffeine.

Quenser walked through two thick metal doors set up like a submarine airlock and then stepped outside.

Heated air immediately hit him like a solid wall.

"…Ugh," he groaned as the coat flapped around him.

The boy was not standing in a military base rooted to the ground. He was atop a giant vehicle which was as tall as a two-story apartment building. Each one distributed its great weight across dozens of tires taller than he was and those special vehicles were combined to create the mobile maintenance base he was used to seeing.

More than a hundred of those vehicles were on the move with the Baby Magnum in the lead.

But where were they?

The scene before his eyes was not quite a complete desert of fine sand, but it was still a wasteland of dried earth and stone that would suck all the moisture out of anything living.

They were in the southern part of the North American continent.

Just like in a Western, the scenery was full of cactuses and giant afro-like things blowing in the wind.

"38 degrees… This isn't quite the same thing as climbing under a heated blanket with the AC on full blast."

"Do you realize what you're saying? Maybe you finally have broken."

"What about you? Why are you skipping out on your work?"

Quenser gave a suspicious look to Frolaytia because she had given into the heat

and stripped of her military uniform. In fact, she wore a cow-print bikini top, denim shorts that showed off every bit of her thighs, and a cowboy hat. She was clearly meant to be a strange sort of cowgirl. “Yes, please” seemed like the only appropriate words.

But Frolaytia feigned ignorance as she answered him.

“This is part of some charity work for the local children. Simply put, we’re giving money to the peddlers who gather around. I had wanted a normal swimsuit, but this was all they had.”

“No fair!! When we tried to go into town to shop, you kicked our asses!!”

“If military personnel invade their territory, we’re violating the agreement. But there’s nothing we can do about them coming to us. And after we said our base was off limits, too.”

“Didn’t you say this was charity? God, you’re so full of it!”

“Yes. To be honest, I don’t really like that excuse. It makes me feel like my brother.”

“That stuff on your skin isn’t just sun oil, is it? It smells minty, so does it have a refreshing agent that keeps your body temperature down!? No fair again!”

“Why are you dressed so heavily?”

“Hot, hot, hot, oh it’s so damn hot!! I can’t stand it!!”

His skin seemed to finally remember the temperature because sweat poured from every pore on his body. Quenser quickly tore off the thick coat and Frolaytia (the major in a cow-print bikini who had sweat dripping down her cleavage) held out two drinks from a cooler.

“Would you prefer a nutrient drink in a small brown bottle or an energy drink in an aluminum can?”

“Please, can’t I use their active ingredients to decide? …But my stomach has been rebelling ever since I drank one of those expensive ones in a small bottle earlier, so could I have the can? Something more like a soda might help distract me.”

“The small bottle it is.”

“I knew you were going to say that, dammit!!”

She tossed him the something-or-other Empress Juice from the Island Nation and he twisted the metal cap to open it.

"…Now that's what I call a view. This is known as the tinderbox of humanity, isn't it?"

"Are you talking about my chest, Quenser?"

"If you're aware how it looks, then put on your uniform, Miss Popping-Out-Of-Her-Top! I'm still gonna stare, though!! Anyway, the Capitalist Corporations home country is to the west and the Information Alliance home country is to the east, right?"

Just as Europe was the spark area for the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization, North America was the most important point for those two world powers.

Frolaytia needlessly held out her chest atop the vehicle traveling south to north.

"This is the Greater Canyon, the absolute demilitarized line dividing a former military superpower between west and east. This would be the greatest scar left by the collapse of the UN. Enough firepower to destroy the world a hundred times over is staring each other down across this line."

The center of the Capitalist Corporations was Los Angeles.

The center of the Information Alliance was New York.

…Just looking at this made the diagram seem incredibly simple, but one could not let their imagination get the better of them. The only way to know what had happened was to ask a living witness like the old maintenance lady.

"It doesn't look that way from what I can see here."

"That's because biological resources tend to recover much faster when human hands can't intervene. It's called a line, but it's actually more than 150km across from east to west, and both world powers have a forbidden desert that extends for 200km beyond that. The delicate balance of power prevents either of them from entering the Greater Canyon, so it's actually quite peaceful here. There's a reason it's known as the world's largest blank area."

"And that's why there are cities dotting that line from south to north and why outsiders like us can enjoy a calm tour of the area?"

"The situation is undeniably insane, but apparently the Capitalist Corporations

and Information Alliance are actually thankful. Well, this is sort of like a yearly event we take turns with."

"?"

"Our transportation mission is only for show. An Object from a 'shared enemy' – that would be us this time – passes through and yet nothing happens. That sense of relief is apparently used to relax the tension of the people around the world. Image is everything for the Capitalist Corporations' Hollywood movies and the Information Alliance's subscription video sites, so this kind of thing must be important."

It was a very "safe country" sort of idea, but that was unavoidable when the highest members of the military where royals or corporate presidents. Hurrah for civilian control. If battlefield country ideas began ruling safe cities, then the world truly was done for.

"So this year, our 37th was tasked with hosting the party?"

"(Our turn wouldn't have come around so soon if a certain two idiots didn't keep causing trouble all over the world. Like in the Mekong District, or in the Mekong District, or maybe in that legendary Mekong District where those idiots were head-over-heels for a blonde girl in a black uniform with a connection to the Information Alliance.)"

"Okay, okay!! I'm the root of all evil! You can call me Quen-Satan!!"

"Quensa-tan?"

"Why does it sound so much cuter like that???"

"That said, it is true we have twenty cutting-edge Second Generations watching our every move from both the east and the west. Do not forget to prepare for the unexpected."

"Can we get back to talking about cute things? And they're over the horizon, so I can't even study them! I'll die for nothing!!"

"The ones we most have to worry about are the support Objects."

Quenser wrinkled his brow as he listened to his bikini cowgirl commander and took a sip of the bitter drink that may have been some kind of traditional Chinese medicine or Chinese alchemy.

"Eww, it tastes like tree roots or dark soil. Um, are you talking about the ones that

carry high-capacity amps and giant radars to improve the performance of other Objects? I thought they couldn't do much on their own."

"The Capitalist Corporations has the Weather Girl which uses meteorological radar and a simulator to improve targeting accuracy. The Information Alliance has the Shield Bash which stabs a bunch of shields and wire barriers into the ground to create obstacles in an enemy Object's path. That might not sound like much, but we can expect a long battle if they're working with another Object and their presence increases the odds of a group battle on a scale never seen in a battlefield country. If the snowball keeps rolling, it could develop into an unstoppable catastrophe. To the point that the existing idea of clean wars would no longer apply."

Just then, someone contacted Frolaytia's radio.

"Heivia to everyone. This train will soon arrive in the next silo city: Giant Pizza. Take a look at that large city silhouette visible to the north. Choo choo. We are right on schedule."

"I see. Fun fact: the more needless chatter included in your reports, the more will be docked from your pay."

"Are you serious!?"

"And that right there applies too."

It really was the worst environment.

Seeing someone else reminded Quenser just what kind of nightmare he was living in, so he cut in.

"Heivia, where are you and what are you doing? I'm about to die after a hellish night of work…"

"What about you!? Where the hell have you been slacking off, you rotten indoor bastard! I'm standing on the front line searching for treasure with a detector that looks like a maid's mop! This is a real death march!! You wanna know how amazing the Greater Canyon is? This thing won't stop beeping and there's hexavalent chromium everywhere around here! And we're really shorthanded, so get your ass down here!!"

"I'm busy with a bathtub full of hot girls, so I'll have to pass."

"I see you've got the brain chemicals pumping too. I'm not going to ask what happened."

That meant they had both been through hell, but Heivia's unilateral pity irritated Quenser enough to mix some truth in with the lies.

"Even if Frolaytia is here dressed as a bikini cowgirl?"

"Wait, Quenser!" protested Frolaytia. "These transmissions are recorded!"

"Hold on! That one's real!? What exactly are you two-…kssshhh!!!???"

He must have gotten distracted because the radio fell silent after some awful static.

Quenser and Frolaytia exchanged a puzzled glance.

"…Did he step on a mine?"

"We might have lost someone unfortunate."

Part 2

After a while…

"Hi, Tia-chan. Can you speak right now?"

While the base vehicles were in transit, the wind washed over Frolaytia's hair and skin on the flat top of a structure the same height as a two-story apartment building. The young man addressing her from her laptop screen with a gratuitous Island Nation honorific had longish silver hair and wore a black tailcoat fit for a Halloween party. He would have looked perfect playing the piano or violin, but Frolaytia knew his hands were unimaginably rough when he removed his white gloves.

There was a simple reason for this: the sheathed katana supported between his neck and shoulder instead of a brass instrument.

Frolaytia narrowed her eyes in slight exasperation.

"We are in the middle of a military operation. I cannot afford any delays to the timetable."

“Oh? But I thought you were in a blank area instead of a battlefield country. Does that mean that the world is a dangerous place wherever you go? I do hear that you can find suspicious commandos hidden in safe countries too.”

“How did you learn what the 37th is doing? Not even a noble should have access to that information.”

“Ah hah hah. It’s nothing like that. You know how much I dislike dangerous military matters. I don’t need to get involved in any of that because I can just ask my friends around the world.”

“…”

That silver-haired man seemed to be stating the ideal for humanity, but Frolaytia knew from experience that those ideals never won out when some power was added into the equation.

This man was a Legitimacy Kingdom noble, but he was also extremely obsessed with charity work. He had never once really felt the value of money, so he would spread around stacks of cash like he was tossing a bit of spare change into the donation box next to a convenience store register. He would feed hungry children, develop a vaccine for an epidemic spreading across the battlefield, and give a chance at employment for youths who were once a part of a criminal organization and had nowhere to go. It all sounded nice, but the amount of money he invested was often so large that the power balance of that region would entirely collapse.

It was like sending out a bomber and airdropping containers stuffed full of cash.

It was a unilateral attack from safe countries to battlefield countries.

The worst part was his utter lack of a long-term view. He would decide everything with a single click made after happening across a banner ad.

But the busty and silver-haired commander’s troubles did not end there.

“By the way, I am actually in North America for some fun right now. The Greater Canyon sure is amazing. They’ve turned the old underground missile silos into geofront cities. It’s been so long since we last met, so how about we get something to eat together? I’ve actually been resisting getting one of those famous gigantic burgers for that.”

“Wait.”

“Hah hah hah. I can hardly wait and I would love to have a long chat with you, Tia-

chan, but I won't be listening to a lecture. The Greater Canyon is only a blank area, so there is nothing at all wrong with a civilian group visiting for some sightseeing and trade."

"How many private troops are you parading around with as a Legitimacy Kingdom noble? You might have more people than the 37th, but I haven't heard a word about this!"

"Oh? I wasn't trying to hide it, but perhaps someone down the line thought it would be best to keep things quiet. A butler or maid maybe. …I teach them to follow the beloved Island Nation's rules by figuring out what they should do before being asked, but I seem to have found a downside to that."

"…"

"Now, now. This isn't that bad, is it? You weren't sent out here to wage war, Tia-chan. You're just crossing the Greater Canyon to show the safe countries how strong the equilibrium between the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance is."

This should not have been acceptable, but whether the country followed monarchy, parliamentarism, capitalism, or socialism, the military was never structured by the book. The unreasonable aspects of a human-made system always snuck in. But even if it was someone three levels higher than Frolaytia who had done something, it was she who would have to wrinkle her brow over it.

"If no one follows the rules, then the system we call war will come along to fill the holes in society. And it's not going to ask nicely."

"Oh? Such profound words for a cowgirl major in a cow-print bikini and a cowboy hat."

Frolaytia tensed and looked back down at how she was dressed.

She was just thankful she had not been smoking her *kiseru*.

"Ah hah hah! You always look so glum criticizing my charity work, but it would seem you're giving back to the local people too, Tia-chan. Could you not shake the peddler children from your uniform's sleeve? Yes, yes. We must ensure the world is filled with kindness, not shellfire."

"~ ~ ~"

Part 3

“So did Heivia die or what?”

“No, he fell into the canyon while talking on the radio, but I think he’s still alive,” replied the Princess. “Distracted walking really is dangerous, isn’t it?”

It was an entirely casual conversation.

A long river flowed through the large canyon likely created by the river’s erosion and there were shelf-like ledges along the sides, creating several levels.

The Baby Magnum and its 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion generally disliked height differences, so they were moving north alongside that dry brick-colored line.

(This is pretty incredible…)

Vehicles the size of two-story apartment buildings were driving along a cracked and bumpy wasteland, but (even if they had slowed down some) it was a very smooth ride. That was necessary when they carried delicate equipment like the largescale computers and ammunition.

(Instead of the tires, it’s the hydraulic cylinders and springs attached to the axles that are supporting them, right? The old maintenance lady said it would be simplest to look at a toy RC car for comparison, but these things weigh more than 100 tons, don’t they?)

And it was not just the Legitimacy Kingdom military adding an abnormal element to the scenery.

They were on their way to one of the cities dotting the Greater Canyon.

They were a lot like truck bases with a gas station in the center and several supermarkets, motels, and the like gathered around.

However, that was only the tip of the iceberg.

“Silo cities, huh?”

Quenser spoke without thinking on the second-story platform circling the outside of one giant vehicle as it passed by. The Princess must have been bored on this transport mission because she spoke to him over the radio from the Baby

Magnum.

“They apparently turned the old missile silos into cities. Weird, aren’t they?”

“Well, the temperature difference between day and night is pretty harsh in the desert, so you don’t gain much by staying out on the surface. And those missile silos are really roomy. I hear the entrance elevator alone can hold an entire large tractor-trailer.”

“They couldn’t have gotten the missiles inside otherwise.”

Most people thought of missile silos as giant holes in the ground, but there was more to them than that. There were guidance pathways to allow the launch smoke to escape, an armory to store more missiles, three-dimensional pathways that connected the main silo with the service entrance, a command input center, a large computer room, and facilities for security, power, barracks, and supplies. A real silo would place all that underground so its presence was not visible via satellite, so they were already like a sort of geofront city. It was on the same scale as the floating cities known as aircraft carriers.

The facilities were no longer needed in this age of clean wars brought about by the collapse of the UN and the end of the nuclear age, but even after the strategic weapons were removed, the underground space remained. Then civilians began living there and building homes until they had something like a giant ant colony that contained tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people.

“The safest form of nuke-proof city, hm?” commented the Princess.

“I doubt it’s just pure durability. I mean, those places have to have deteriorated a lot with time. And no one will be running durability tests anymore. The bedrock that supposedly makes them nuke-proof could collapse and bury them all deep underground. Makes me shudder just thinking about it.”

“Powering through it with durability makes them sound a lot like Objects.”

“Princess, have you never heard the legend of the Liquid Brain which had its cockpit elevator malfunction, trapping the Elite inside for three months? Toward the end of that survival experience, she apparently saw the beans in her own crap begin to sprout and she had to seriously debate whether or not to eat those sprouts.”

“Hard cover books are too much effort. I wish they would go ahead and make it into a movie.”

“Not a chance. It’d hurt the image of their holy knight girl.”

However, they could not visit the actual silo cities.

They were only passing by at low speed, so the most they could do was buy souvenirs from the peddler boys and girls. And they still could not let their guard down because one of them might be a disguised child soldier carrying a rocket launcher. They could not exactly buy anything edible, but they had relaxed somewhat after making it this far without incident.

But things were a little different this time.

There was a radio transmission from another one of the vehicles just as they were finishing passing by the silo city.

“Command to Baby Magnum.”

“Frolaytia?”

“We have an Object approaching from the north. Based on the footage from the drone we sent ahead, it appears to be the Faith Organization’s Generation Two Jack in the Box. It has apparently been frequently patrolling back and forth between the silo cities in this area.”

“Are they distributing emergency food as usual?”

“Or hiring people for simple military work to spread money throughout the region and gather support. Either way, they’re trying to spread their faith like always. You should be detecting it with your Object’s cameras and radar soon, so be on your guard.”

“Understood.”

“I’m sure you understand, but the second you actually fire a shot, it’s game over. Don’t forget that this is the Greater Canyon located between the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance home countries. Again, they’ve gone around providing food and employment, so we can’t expect the locals to give an impartial witness account.”

(Hold on, wait. Are all three other world powers working together to crush us here?)

Quenser gulped as he looked over toward the great cloud of dust that appeared before the 50m Object was visible. It was clearly taller than the base zone vehicle’s second-story platform. It looked like a filthy cumulonimbus cloud and it

seemed to symbolize fearsome horsepower.

Tricky camouflage was not needed.

If it could not brute force its way through any obstacle, it could not be called an Object.

“So we’ll lock onto each other and remain as cautious as possible while passing by without firing a single shot,” said the Princess.

“Exactly right,” replied Frolaytia.

Quenser felt a change in movement from the two-story apartment building of a vehicle he sat on. All of the vehicles moved over to the right as if clearing the way.

“Talk about dangerous. A stray shot could fly right into the silo city at this range.”

“I won’t shoot, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“It’s that *shouldn’t* that scares me!!”

Meanwhile, the base of the cumulonimbus cloud came into view.

It was the Faith Organization’s Second Generation Jack in the Box.

(A jack in the box, huh?)

The 50m spherical main body was supported by static electricity using four floats arranged into a wide-open V-shape and a narrowly closed V-shape. It had a single main cannon on the very front. However, it was not a low-stability plasma cannon, a laser beam, a rapid-fire beam cannon, a coilgun, a railgun, or any of the other usual varieties.

Quenser checked the shape with binoculars and saw its main cannon was structured like a collapsible parabolic antenna or an auto-open umbrella. A single main pillar stuck out forward and eight arms were attached alongside that. And the sides of the main pillar were covered in something like gear teeth.

“The main cannon uses a powerful spring to launch a metal shell. One made of lead,” explained Frolaytia.

“A spring, huh?”

“That’s where its name comes from. The Faith Organization had a pretty bad accidental explosion with a railgun capacitor three years ago, and this Object was

built from that trauma."

"And did the metal industry use that mood of self-restraint to encroach on the electronics industry's turf? One person's misfortune is another person's opportunity, I guess. …Then again, their factories are all state managed, so they're cut off from all that business stuff."

"Oh, you sound calm. Did hearing it uses a spring make it sound like a child's toy? Keep in mind what it is in earthquake countermeasures that supports super high-rise buildings that weight tens of thousands of tons. Then you should understand just what kind of power that thing contains."

Frolaytia rattled off that comparison so quickly that Quenser had to imagine she had had a difficult time when writing up a report for the safe country councilmembers.

"And we even have some weapons that use springs as their primary source of power."

"Yeah, those landmines that spring straight up and scatter a bunch of metal balls, right?"

"For a more direct example, there is also an anti-tank weapon that uses a thick spring in a portable launch tube to fire a warhead instead of an old-fashioned rocket propelled by explosives. They can hit a tank 500m away."

…Quenser decided to stay silent when he sensitively picked up on the fact that she wanted to make use of the otherwise pointless information she had spent all night learning for an entirely pointless meeting.

He sat there and listened to the much-appreciated radio lecture from Female

Teacher Frolaytia who was desperately searching for a way to release the feelings pent up inside her.

“The simple structure makes the equations easier, so they can combine vectors to multiply the output force all they want. This might become more of a threat in the future when we hit an upper limit in the power of railguns and coilguns. Each of the eight arms contains an extremely powerful coil spring made of chromium steel and that power is made to gather in the main pillar and fire the ring-shaped shell. And don’t take it lightly because it’s so primitive. This is cutting-edge tech that was on the table as a possible non-linear motor mass driver.”

“But that was never completed, was it?” pointed out the Princess.

“You can be scary at times like this, Princess,” said Quenser. “So what does it have other than the main cannon?”

“The whole thing is a crystallization of elastic alloys,” explained Frolaytia. “The suspension uses physical-sensor inverted pendulums and it has a quick-dash tail on the back.”

“A tail???”

“Guiderails are located along the back 180 degrees of the spherical main body and a giant cylinder can freely move along that. Think of it like a giant pile bunker. It fires that in the opposite direction to negate the main cannon’s recoil and it also stabs it into the ground to make quick dashes without using its static electricity system. The power it uses to move left and right can’t be ignored. Its evasion accuracy is really quite good.”

“Four legs, a main cannon that can open and close, and a tail.”

“The Faith Organization apparently calls it Fenrir. So it’s a giant wolf.”

“Their leader is called the Venerable Elder, right? Can they not sleep at night if they don’t give everything cool names???”

Meanwhile, the moment of tension was fast approaching.

A transmission arrived from Heivia who was apparently searching for landmines on the front line (and had supposedly fallen into the canyon while not paying attention).

“I’ve got visual confirmation of the bastard. Their maintenance base seems to be vehicle-based as well, but they use treads. The round bastard is approaching with that convoy surrounding him.”

“Treads are probably a huge pain to fix when they break.”

“Worst of all, I bet they shake so much your pelvis just about breaks when you’re seated inside.”

“Everyone, review the ROE,” said Frolaytia. “We’ll be passing them on the right, so get behind the nearest cover and keep your firearm at the ready. But don’t put your finger on the trigger. This is a yearly event, so let’s get through it peacefully but with extreme caution.”

Quenser had not been issued a firearm, but even he could feel his fingertips itching for a trigger.

“This is strange… The Faith Organization is too close. We moved out of the way, but they aren’t moving to their right too. Who do they think they are? They’re just cutting straight down the center!”

“Don’t take it negatively. It’s a terrain issue. I bet they don’t want to get too close to the cliff’s edge. Listen, what we have to do doesn’t change. We pass them by without doing anything. The Faith Organization is also just completing a yearly event here, so they have no reason to start a pointless battle.”

The wind whirled around.

The vehicles were the size of two-story apartment or school buildings and some of them passed by only a few meters away. Before even thinking about their assault rifle bullets, they were close enough to jump to the enemy vehicle if they took a running start. It was not often they had time to stare at Faith Organization uniforms from so close up.

They wore skin-tight uniforms despite being in a blazing hot wasteland.

But instead of being highly disciplined, it seemed more like they were mocking the Legitimacy Kingdom troops for their rough appearance while passing by so close.

Shielded autocannons creaked on their rotating turrets with a metallic sound like a park swing set. The weapons slowly turned to match their relative speed and keep their sights on the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers’ chests. Those things had enough firepower to destroy a reinforced concrete statue like it was styrofoam. He knew nothing was going to happen, but his throat still grew dry at the sight.

(But is it really safe?)

Some very unpleasant doubts creeped into Quenser’s mind on the second-story

platform.

(The Paper Bikini we ran into in the Mekong District was a Faith Organization Second Generation too, wasn't it? That isn't going to pull the trigger on a conflict despite what the calculations say, will it?)

He turned his gaze toward the Baby magnum up front.

The two Objects were also passing by at only a few dozen meters apart.

And that was when it happened.

The Faith Organization Object suddenly fired its main cannon and the Legitimacy Kingdom Object dodged to the side with all its might.

A metal shell was fired with unbelievable force using the combined power of eight arms concentrated on a single point.

The Princess dodged like swinging her torso away from a boxer's straight right. That extremely swift footwork was unbelievable for a 200,000 ton mass of metal.

But this was no time to be staring in awe.

He did not even have enough time to do anything as admirable as get down on the floor. When the shockwave hit the two-story apartment building of a vehicle, it pitched forward and rose from the ground, causing Quenser to fall on his butt and roll along the steel surface.

Next, the Jack in the Box sprayed liquefied lead from something like a water pipe near the point of the floats at its feet. The lead collided with the base of the main cannon pillar. Only the base area spun around, rapidly cooled and hardened, and created a ringed shell shaped a lot like a baumkuchen. The next shell had been loaded.

"Bh!? Frolaytia, emergency!!"

"You idiots!!!!!!"

"Who is…that lovely comment directed at!?"

Now that they had been fired on, they could not just stand around. The Baby Magnum began dodging left and right, but it had yet to return fire even once.

"Frolaytia, what are my orders?" asked the Princess.

“~ ~ ~”

“What am I supposed to do, Frolaytia!?”

Quenser thought he could hear her grinding her teeth even from here.

If they did nothing, the enemy would maintain the advantage. The base vehicles might be directly targeted and the nearby silo city might be caught in the middle as well. The city was deep underground and protected by the thick bedrock in order to resist a nuclear explosion, but there were more than 10,000 people on the surface. They could not sacrifice those people.

The busty, silver-haired commander summed it all up for them.

“Ohhh, honestly!! Everyone, here are your orders: make sure every last one of you survives!!!!!”

The fact that she did not directly tell them to kill the enemy was a sign of her maiden-like bashfulness.

Non-Object gunfire began to ring out all around. Grenades were thrown back and forth across the gap of a few meters. When some Faith Organization guard soldiers tried to jump across like old-fashioned pirates, the Legitimacy Kingdom hit them with their assault rifle stocks and knocked them down between the vehicles. And that was a canyon of death where the ground was constantly being torn up by treads and tires taller than a person.

Quenser heard the creaking of a park swing set from quite nearby.

It was a shielded autocannon.

If that was fired, he would have a fist-sized hole blown in him even if he was hiding behind a bulletproof door.

“Dammit!! Is these violent bunch really going around doing heroic volunteer work!?”

It was time to make up his mind.

He prepared some Hand Axe plastic explosive he carried in his backpack and threw it a few meters ahead. The gunner was mostly protected by the thick shield and he could not even see their face, but that did not matter with an explosive. He could blast the entire autocannon to pieces at the press of a button.

There was only one problem.

(I didn't have time to put a fuse in it!!)

"Okay…uh, kaboom!!!!!"

He had no choice but to shout it at the top of his lungs. When he did, the gunner jumped so much their head poked above the shield and then they rolled on out. They seemed to think they really were caught in an explosion. When he realized the tearful gunner – whose legs had given out and who was about to pee herself – was a 13-year-old girl with twintails, Quenser – a true man and a dandy with a discerning eye (for the difference between 12-year-olds and 13-year-olds) – gave a silent salute. He was glad he had not blown her up.

Meanwhile, the large vehicles passed each other by and the movable range of the autocannon prevented it from targeting him anymore.

However, it was too soon to breathe a sigh of relief.

100 vehicles on each side were passing by, so another one would be coming along soon enough.

But…

There was an explosion like a volcanic eruption.

The shock was so great that a Faith Organization special vehicle was torn to pieces and even Quenser was knocked from his feet.

"Bfhh!? Whah uh eh…!?"

Quenser's jaw was not working properly as he held his head in his hands and yelled something unintelligible.

(Old-fashioned artillery!? That didn't seem to be an Object…)

He felt like a solid mass of sound had taken up residence deep in his ears, but he could still hear something like a high-pitched whistle slicing through the air. And the noise was getting closer. It was an extra-large shell that had been fired up to the stratosphere in a parabolic arc so gravity would give it frightening acceleration as it fell.

More and more of the Faith Organization's giant vehicles were enveloped by explosions. Each time, the two-story apartment buildings of metal were badly twisted and tossed straight upwards.

They were receiving unexpected artillery support, but Quenser could not just

celebrate given the close quarters of the battlefield. Modern artillery shells apparently had wings attached and could be freely guided using GPS, but nothing in the world was perfect. And even if their aim was accurate, the blast propelled razor-sharp shrapnel and a ground-level fireworks show began as the machinegun ammo belts, artillery shells, and missiles caught fire.

“Tia-chaaan.”

Then a radio transmission arrived with the kind of encryption that looked like an amateur had given it a good try. So of course their military grade equipment could decrypt it just fine.

“You seem to be having difficulties, so I’ll be helping out. I was worried we weren’t going to get to use this railway gun anyway.”

“You idiot!!”

Frolaytia must have decided something properly encrypted would not reach him because she used something that would be more at home on a café’s free wi-fi.

“We don’t need your help! And what is a civilian doing here anyway!?”

“Wellll, nobles like us have a policy known as nobles oblige, do we not? That expands the definition of justified self-defense to include the entire city we happened across. The Greater Canyon is a blank zone, so I too am free to engage in combat if I deem the residents of this non-militarized region are in danger.”

“That is no more than a custom! It isn’t officially defined in military law! And it’s even more of a problem outside of Legitimacy Kingdom territory!!”

Incidentally, that crystallization of romance known as a railway gun was a gun so gigantic it could only be moved via train. But here…

(Did they go to the effort of laying rail or is it meaninglessly loaded on a truck? And how many people do you need to run a single railway gun if you include the surrounding guards? Then again, they might have automated a lot of it these days…)

“I’m on my way there, so do you best to survive until then.”

“Everyone,” announced Frolaytia. “Escape this threat before that idiot arrives!!”

Only that last transmission used proper military encryption.

And they could not just sit around listening forever.

In order to avoid the burning remains of the destroyed ones, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization's monstrous vehicles moved even closer together.

Quenser saw some people in Faith Organization uniforms make a crouching start and begin running to jump over to his vehicle while he was knocked down.

This time it was two busty blondes wearing gasmasks. Since their hair color and heights were about the same, were they a pair of upperclassmen twins?

His life, or his moe spirit?

It was time for that true man to make the ultimate decision.

"Ah, ah, awah!!!???"

The idiot grabbed and raised a maintenance wrench about the size of a wooden sword, but he could not work up much motivation and was weak in the knees. Thus, the useless idiot simply stood on the front line in the spot the enemy planned to land and the gas mask girls ultimately collided with him and they fell to the second-story platform's floor in a heap.

While being supplied with the softness of boobs all over his face, Quenser heard a voice from their radios.

"Enemy radar lock confirmed! Repeat, the Legitimacy Kingdom was the first to make a radar lock! That means we have no choice but to fight you to stop your irrational unit's rampage!!"

"Mghfgh, is your Pilot Elite making excuses to their allies while they fight!? If you feel that guilty about it, then don't do it!!"

Quenser was answered with a pair of brutal sounds.

His sommelier's judgement determined them to be a D or an E. His vision was blocked by those lovely-smelling boobs, but he was pretty sure he knew what those sounds were: the gas mask girls had decided their assault rifles would be difficult to use in this situation, so they had drawn large knives from the sheaths at their ankles.

While his brain was filled with a bizarre mixture of adrenaline and endorphins, Quenser dizzily shouted at the top of his lungs.

"So are you cute, or not!? Don't think you can get away with being ugly after all this!!!!!"

Still boob-blinded, Quenser swung his giant wrench around in the hopes of at least seeing their faces. He felt a solid sensation as the bottom of the giant wrench hit the filter can that looked like an octopus mouth. The mask did not come off since it was fixed in place with several rubber straps, but it was enough to shake whichever twin was on top.

That was a miracle.

He could not rely on it, so he had to escape.

Just as Quenser tried to crawl away, either Gasmask L or Gasmask R did something odd. They were about two meters apart. That was too far away to swing a knife and hit him, but she stayed down on one knee, held her right arm straight out, and pointed the knife tip at him.

To him, it looked a lot like she was holding the blade like a handgun.

He had a very bad feeling about this.

Now, a question: what was the Jack in the Box known for?

“Oh, no! Is that thing spring-loa-…”

He heard a dull sound much like a blade stabbing through the center of a thick and fully-extended rubber band. A silver flash flew out. A thick coil spring had been loaded in the grip. Quenser did not have time to even think about dodging. He just sat there as he felt an impact in his left chest like someone was placing their full weight on him in high heels. Then he collapsed backwards and writhed in pain.

“Bhoh!? Ghah!!”

The 20cm chromium steel tip had been launched into his chest with the power of a spring, but Quenser was writhing with far more energy than one would expect.

The gasmask twins tilted their heads and reached for their firearms once more.

They must have wanted to execute him with the muzzle to his head because the identical sisters slowly approached. The Legitimacy Kingdom scum looked up at them with a blank look in his eyes.

“Ugh…wait…at least let me show off what saved my life! Oh, thank goodness I bought this bargain double-length issue of a pinup magazine behind my commander’s back and had it hidden in my uniform to help me get through all that harsh and lonely work…!!”

Quenser had entered an odd high as the fear, elation, fighting spirit, and lingering sensation of boobs kept rolling around in his head one after another.

And that may have been why he overlooked it.

Even if they were freaks who walked around in gasmasks, girls were generally less than pleased to have a sexy Halloween magazine waved in their faces. (And the seal to prevent instore browsing of adult material acted as the limit breaker.) Plus, this was the Faith Organization military, so all of their soldiers had to be pure holy knights and pure warrior maidens.

The situation was hopeless, but as he lay on his back, Quenser saw something behind the approaching gasmask girls of unknown attractiveness.

Someone slowly stepped out from behind cover on this second-story platform. It was Myonri, a short girl from the Legitimacy Kingdom. And the weapon she held at her hip was a submachinegun that fired handgun bullets.

Quenser instantly understood the situation.

That girl did not understand moe.

“Wait, no!! Cute girls are one of the world’s most important resources!!”

With a merciless spray of gunfire, the twins were mowed down without their killer knowing why it was so important that they came as a set. The shock knocked a certain someone back down and his vision was blocked once more. This time, it was dead boobs that covered Quenser’s face. The idiot could not stop the tears, but then he realized that he could still feel a pulse in those boobs.

Myonri explained after shoving the gasmask girls aside with her boot.

“Bulletproof jackets. Those black-hearted people are bound to be wearing carbon or spider silk ones.”

“Oh, thank god. Thank all of their gods, Myonri…”

“Hm? You were actually scared to tears and snot???”

It was not the fear, but he had his reasons.

“Anyway, let’s tie them up and use them as human shields.”

“Hold on, I don’t like the sound of that! Myonri, I’m afraid of what would happen if I left them with you, so I’ll tie up those girls!!”

In the distance, the Jack in the Box had apparently been firing lead shells on the Princess the entire time, but their “skirmish” seemed to be over. The most frightening part was the skill displayed by the Princess in dodging every shot without returning fire even once.

The two sets of 100 vehicles had finished passing by at the giants’ feet.

But that did not mean it was over.

After they had used zip ties to bind the gasmask twins’ hands behind their backs, Frolaytia contacted them over the radio.

“Everyone, we will now construct our maintenance base zone. Prepare for the next clash. Split between a base construction team and a combat preparation team. We will hold a pre-mission briefing for those headed to the front line, so they need to gather separately.”

“Frolaytia, do you think they’re going to make a U-turn to attack again?”

“If that was only a provocation or spontaneous battle, I would say it was over, but if they had a planned reason for breaking our implicit understanding, then they will be back. While we only travel down this way once a year, the Faith Organization frequently moves back and forth providing food and employment as a way to spread their faith. Since we can’t tell what the enemy is going to do, we have to prepare for the worst. …If they plan to fight in this area, it’s sure to come down to speed. We have to settle this while the heads of the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance in their safe countries are still too afraid of all-out war to do anything.” She paused for a beat. “Also, if the Faith Organization does make a U-turn and attacks again, that silo city will be caught in the middle of it all. There is only one way to keep tens of thousands of lives from being trampled in that dance of giants: evacuate them ahead of time. Whatever the case, we have no time. If you understand that, then quit wasting time with pointless questions and get to work!!”

Part 4

The 100 giant vehicles were being connected together into a maintenance base zone at an accelerated rate, but they did not have time to wait for the main conference room to be completed.

Thus, Frolaytia (who had changed back into her usual uniform) had gathered the fieldwork soldiers out on the scorching wasteland.

“Due to an unexpected accident, the electronic simulation division is not at its best, so we cannot put together as tight an operation as usual. Prepare yourself for this mission to be more dangerous than normal. Do not miss a word I say here.”

Next to Quenser, Heivia was already raising his hand.

“Just to check up front, we can start things next time, right? We can be the ones to fire first?”

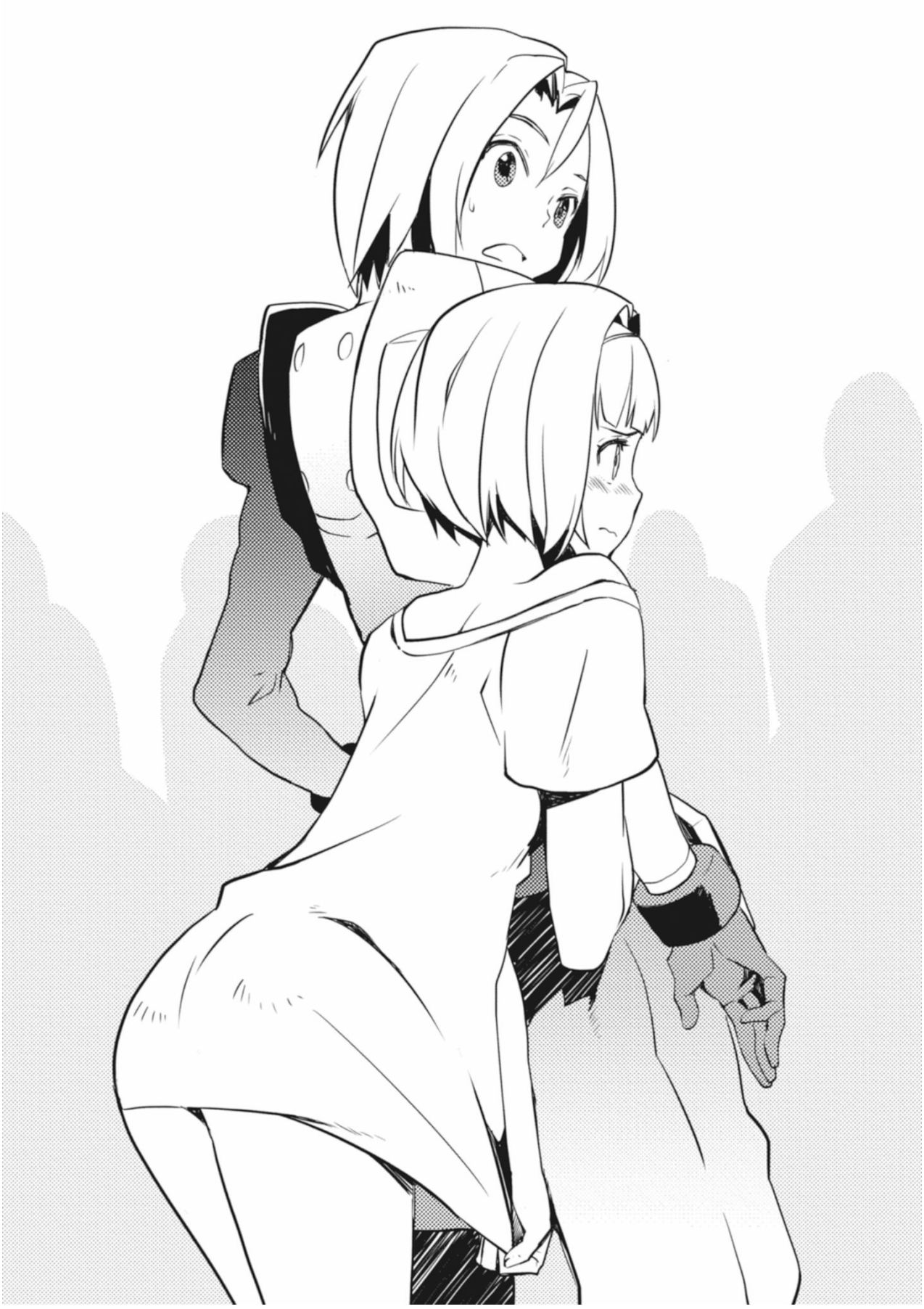
“The uniformed officers in Paris aren’t going to like it, but protecting the civilians of the silo city will just barely make us look better. This is technically a blank zone and the people living here have no connection to the Capitalist Corporations or Information Alliance. If there is a pressing need to protect innocent people from the flames of war, we are to reach out a helping hand. …The clean war framework comes in handy here.”

It was a lot like an outside classroom. Frolaytia stood in front of a whiteboard that had been dragged out of storage and a few paper printouts were attached to it. They were primarily photographs taken by a drone or the Baby Magnum.

“The enemy is the Faith Organization’s Second Generation Jack in the Box. The Object is full of elastic alloy tech. In other words, it uses springs. The primary two problems are the metal shell main cannon and the tail it fires into the ground for a quick dash.”

“So what’s your feel of the situation, Princess? I mean, it looked like you were dodging its main cannon pretty handily.”

When Quenser asked, everyone’s eyes gathered on the Princess who was cooling down with a small handheld fan hooked up to a smartphone quick charger using a USB cable. For some reason, she was not wearing her usual blue special suit and instead wore a baggy T-shirt that left her legs entirely bare. Plus, she was outside. Since cooling sheets were visible along with glimpses of her bright armpits and thighs, the glasses doctor woman may have ordered her to perform an emergency cooldown. However…



“I think I only managed that because of the close range. For them, it may have

been like swinging around a flyswatter while peering through a telescope."

"…"

"…"

"…"

"Wh-what?"

After finally noticing everyone's focus on her, the Princess shrank down a bit, but that did not change anything. She fidgeted under the pressure of everyone's gazes and she finally found a sanctuary.

"Nyah…Quenser…"

"That's it. Once this is over, let's drag that kitten-tamer out back."

"That's it. Once this is over, let's drag that kitten-tamer out back."

"That's it. Once this is over, let's drag that kitten-tamer out back."

While all the male soldiers agreed on a plan, the Princess blushed a little while firmly but softly using Quenser's back as a shield.

The guys would slam shut the door to their heart if someone said anything to them here, so Frolaytia asked a careful question.

"So it wouldn't be that easy if they could keep the proper distance while they fought?"

"Hey, Princess. Which felt like more of a threat, the main cannon or the tail?"

The fidgeting Princess clung to him all the more and Quenser thanked his past self for taking off his backpack. That left nothing to impede the soft sensations he could feel here and there.

He had arrived in a wonderful bubble where a warm breath reached his ear if the Princess so much as opened her mouth. This paradise was sure to burst at some point, but that moment was not now!

"They were both a threat, but if I had to say, the main cannon, I guess. I think that quick dash is too fast, so the Jack in the Box can't fully control it."

"Can you tell me more?"

“Okay, Quenser. But keep in mind this is all just based on my impression… I don’t think it can accurately lock on and fire its main cannon while performing a quick dash. It can only switch between two modes: attack and evade.”

The Princess clung tightly to Quenser’s back and viewed the potatoes over the boy’s shoulder.

“I can predict which way it will dash based on the direction the tail is pointing. It would be a problem if it could dash back and forth in a lightning bolt zigzag, but since it can’t attack while doing that, I would actually just have more time to aim. Looking at it that way, only the main cannon really has any chance of doing real damage.”

“Let’s go with that plan.” Frolaytia snapped her fingers. “We will assume the Jack in the Box’s greatest threat is the spring-loaded main cannon that uses its simple structure to combine the vectors of the eight arms. On the assumption that the Princess can keep up with its speed head-on, the rest of you morons will focus on a support operation to destroy its main cannon.”

“How!? Are we supposed to mess with the main cannon attached to a Second Generation that has a standard speed of 500kph and a max speed of more than 700kph!? That’s like jumping onto a linear motor train moving at full speed! The instant we touch it, we’ll be blown away! It’s suicide!!”

“Listen through to the end, Chief Moron.”

Frolaytia breathed out the sweet smoke inhaled from her *kiseru*.

“There’s no need to actually touch the main cannon itself. As Quenser explained earlier, the Jack in the Box uses its tail for more than just extreme high speed dashes. It also swings the tail in the opposite direction of the main cannon and drives the thick stake into empty air to negate the recoil. …That means it can’t support that metal shell cannon all on its own. Wouldn’t the 200,000 ton Object flip right over without the tail?”

Quenser and the others had nothing against the Jack in the Box, but defeating it would solve everything. In that case, it was enough to render it unusable without actually destroying it. Whether to kill or spare the helpless fool was a decision for the Princess whose warm pulse reached the back she clung to.

“Do we have an image? I want to know the exact process the tail uses to fire.”

“What materials do we have to work with?”

“About that baumkuchen shell made from liquid lead…”

“This is so tight in the chest and butt… Why does this uniform feel like it needs to show off my body?”

They must have wanted to avoid thinking about the approaching threat of death because the idiots got to work like someone pulling out a manga volume in the middle of cleaning their room. There was also a gal talking about something else entirely, but letting that distract you meant you had lost. Fail to prepare properly and only death awaited you. It was seriously a life-or-death issue!!

The worker ants’ thoughts went into overdrive as they grew weirdly overclocked in their fight against impure thoughts. It was looking like you could not expect much even if those potatoes drew out all their wisdom, but…

(Eight arms, springs, liquid lead baumkuchen shells, combined vectors, recoil control, force negation, a main column covered with gear teeth, and the main cannon and tail have to remain in constant balance. In that case, it’s all about moving its weight and both combining and negating vectors, so we don’t even need to touch the tail itself, do we?)

“Quenser, did you have an idea?”

“Eh? No, not really!?”

“You have no right to withhold information. You are obligated to report even the smallest thing.”

“Y-you’re overestimating me. I really don’t have any ideas. None at all. Or none that aren’t terrible, terrible ideas…”

Frolaytia silently raised her lit *kiseru*.

“Explain. Now.”

“Eek!! O-oh, come on! Why did I have to think up something like this!? I’m so stupid!!”

Quenser clicked his tongue in utter displeasure before raising his hands and coming clean. He was pretty sure he felt his shoulder blades touch some kind of soft mounds when they moved, but that was a secret.

“Ad…adhesive.”

“Meaning? I bear full responsibility as the commander, so judging a plan good or

bad is not your duty. You know about the Faith Organization's actions and the hexavalent chromium, don't you? This is an urgent issue either way, so out with it."

"Umm, dammit…do I really have to say it?"

Quenser hesitated on and on while shaking his head.

He then gave a hypothetical as if shaking free of something.

"This entire area is a parched wasteland, so clouds of sand form pretty easily. The Object created something like a cumulonimbus cloud when it approached, for example. We could use a vaporizer to mix in microscopic adhesive and let that float through the air. The Jack in the Box's tail is about 25 meters long and it grows to twice that when the spike inside is fired. And it used its extra-large springs and weights to kick at the air. Which means…"

"You want to change the viscosity of the air itself?"

"Air is a fluid too, so its response will change depending on the viscosity. The Jack in the Box's kick will be more powerful than expected and it will be knocked upwards and lose control. Add that unexpected turn of events to the great recoil of firing the main cannon and it should flip right over."

Someone in the crowd whistled and the Princess clung even tighter to Quenser's uniformed back, but Frolaytia's expression remained grim.

Yes, a theory alone was meaningless.

This was not over until the Faith Organization's Second Generation had actually toppled over.

"Any ideas on a specific adhesive to use?"

"A polymer of dihydric phenol and epichlorohydrin, commonly known as epoxy resin. We should be able to use the filler for gaps in the base zone's walls, so we'll have plenty of it."

"And the vaporizer?"

"Unlike wood or instant glue, this stuff hardens in reaction to heat, so you don't have to worry too much about maintaining a vacuum inside the container. And it shouldn't get clogged up during such a short mission. Let's take apart a few air-conditioning units and use their large fans."

“Hm,” thought the busty and silver-haired commander with her narrow *kiseru* in her mouth.

And then she spoke.

“So what’s the problem?”

“Umm, there’s a problem on the health front. This will be spread across the area as a fine mist and carelessly breathing it in could harm your trachea and lungs.”

“And?”

When she asked further, Quenser repeatedly poked his index fingers together and confessed.

“Since it reacts to heat and we need all the adhesive to react, we’ll have to fry all the air in the combat area. Wh-which means the conflagration might just reach the surface part of the silo city if the wind direction doesn’t cooperate…”

Part 5

“Hey, it’s the sheriff!”

“It’s the sheriff who’s gotten all fat without any work to do!”

After buying the usual donut and coffee set at the usual place, he heard the children teasing him. His stomach had gotten quite fat and his fingers had swollen too much to wear his old ring. That was why he instead wore it on a thin chain as a necklace. When he glared their way, the children vanished into the alley, but he did not have time to worry about them.

Thomas Goldenclipper did not dislike the atmosphere of this city.

This silo city was called Giant Pizza.

Focusing just at the surface, it looked like a truck base made up of a large gas station surrounded by supermarkets and lodging facilities. But that did not lead to stable income because they had to rely on the caravans traveling north or south across North America. There was a huge difference between the good times and the bad times and it was the Faith Organization’s food and temporary

employment that saved them during those desperate bad times. In addition to paying them, the Faith Organization would select people as a technician or factory chief if they picked up the proper skills, so everyone was focused on them. The position of authority must have come with a heavy burden because anyone who stuck with it too much tended to get sick, but the Faith Organization had apparently built a hospital to care for those who worked themselves too hard and grew ill. It was a disaster for the people affected, but as long as they survived, they could laugh it off as a long vacation eventually.

This place was built on the Faith Organization's good will.

The deeper underground you were, the greater your status in this city.

On the surface, you could not protect yourself from the intense sunlight or sand clouds, yet you still had to give your all to your work and smile pleasantly for the drivers who arrived from elsewhere. And yet Thomas felt more at home on the surface than with those of high enough status to ignore the seasons and even whether it was day or night. He preferred the terrain up here and he also preferred the type of people up here. This city was made of people who had gathered at an old missile silo when they had nowhere left to go, so what meaning was there in building their own hierarchy and looking down on others? The muscular macho men who had been chosen as temporary Faith Organization factory workers were eating burgers larger than their heads at a diner, a waitress was smiling as she watched them, housewives and a souvenir stand owner were setting aside business and enjoying a conversation, and children were running around and playing wherever they could find a small space and a ball.

He saw something here far more worth protecting than those high-status people who had slimy skin like some kind of nocturnal reptile.

That was why Thomas Goldenclipper kept to the surface as a sheriff and went around watching everyone live their lives. And he much preferred not having anything to do.

But reality was cruel.

If he had been a little denser, he might have entirely overlooked the oddity.

"…?"

He grew curious about an asphalt-paved area larger than a soccer field.

It was a drive-in theater. It must have been too old-fashioned even when the city's primary customers were truck drivers because it did not get much business

and the screen, which looked like a giant blank billboard, had grown stained from all the sand and direct sunlight.

People had actually gathered at that forgotten entertainment facility.

In fact, the drive-in theater was outdoor and could not project a movie until night fell. There was no good reason to gather a bunch of rough four-wheel-drive vehicles there under the hot sun.

Thomas thought this was an ultra-rare case of illegal parking. In a desert city, not many drivers would risk having their ride taken from them.

Since he tilted his head and approached, his antenna's sensitivity was apparently one level too weak. Even when he saw the blatant khaki-covered paint jobs, a certain possibility did not occur to him.

And just as he prepared to call out to them, he felt someone grab his shoulder from behind. Then he felt a shock on the back of his right knee. From there, he had no idea what happened. His vision spun around, his back slammed into something, and both his surprised lungs forgot what their job was supposed to be.

Only after struggling to breathe for a bit did he realize he had been thrown to the ground.

Some boys in military uniforms he did not recognize were peering down at him. They had looks of complete and utter annoyance.

"…What do we do with him?"

"The city doesn't have much time left. It's done for if we don't solve all its problems with the Faith Organization and the hexavalent chromium. We have to save everyone even if that means being a bit rough with some of them."

"What was it we needed again? The police station, the traffic control center, the broadcast station, the telephone switching station…"

When he heard the list of facilities, Thomas forgot all about his trouble breathing and widened his eyes. He had a feeling this was very bad indeed. The list sounded very dangerous to him.

They were not with the Faith Organization. Those were Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms!

And they had one more thing to say.

“This is a disaster on all sides, but don’t worry because we’re not obligated to sympathize with you. We’ve got to occupy those facilities and gain control of the city’s functions. Sorry, but we’ll be getting a bit of help from you.”

Part 6

Quenser, Heivia, and the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers were not exactly enthusiastic while listening to the energetic calls for customers and the cheers of children chasing after a ball.

But no matter how much they wanted to deny it, the Jack in the Box was coming. After targeting them, it would never let the Baby Magnum leave the combat zone. It was sure to be scrambled the instant they made any obvious attempt to go elsewhere.

…This city would soon be a battlefield.

First and foremost, it was impossible to evacuate the silo city’s hundreds of thousands of people in such a short period of time. Not even the ten thousand on the surface would be able to descend to the nuke-resistant area deep underground in time. The battalion only had enough vehicles for their own personnel of less than a thousand and not even all the city’s personal cars and transport vehicles could carry them all. Plus, even if they had enough vehicles, sending them all out at once would only cause a giant traffic jam before even arriving in the wasteland. The Faith Organization was sure to act before they got out.

So as the base commander, Major Frolaytia Capistrano turned that basic idea on its head.

Quenser, Heivia, and the others repeated their orders.

“We need to build a maintenance base zone here as quickly as possible! Once we do that, international treaties allow us to protect the city from the Jack in the Box’s shellfire!!”

They were to place the mobile maintenance base right on top of the silo city.

The traditional clean wars began and ended with a clash between Objects, so it

was difficult to end up with the maintenance base zone's soldiers fighting each other. Some battles had of course gotten out of hand and the maintenance base had been directly targeted, but this would make it much more difficult to target the base zone than if they just left it alone. It also increased the people's odds of survival.

"It doesn't matter if we can't evacuate everyone before the battle begins," agreed Quenser. "We just have to keep the evacuation going during the battle and continue getting the surface people down underground. The area below the bedrock is built to resist a nuke, so it should hold up for a bit while that thing is rampaging around."

The Legitimacy Kingdom was not exactly a pure and innocent hero either. To defeat the Jack in the Box, they had to turn a toxic adhesive into mist, spread it all around, and then get it to react by frying the air. If the winds were just wrong, their sea of flames could reach the city's surface area.

They had to succeed here and remove the threat.

And the soldiers would act as meat cushions to buy enough time for that.

That was all they could do.

Heivia spoke while knocking down and restraining a middle-aged man who seemed to be a local policeman…no, a sheriff.

"Let's ask him for some information. Top priority is the cargo entrance to the underground area. We can't just wander around warning people with megaphone, right?"

"Yeah, that would cause a major panic. In the worst case, we would have a riot and looting on our hands. Our timetable would fall apart and there would be no stopping the Jack in the Box."

That was why they could not just spread the necessary data online and leave the rest to the local police. If they did not know how the information would spread, everyone would be slaughtered for sure.

Onsite "cooperation" was absolutely vital.

After all, there were more than ten thousand people on the surface. Even if they could protect them from the Jack in the Box by setting up their maintenance base zone right on top of the silo city's location on the map, they did not have time to deal with extra chaos.

They had to take control of the police station and other peace keeping agencies, explain the situation to the authorities, and convince them to cooperate. Fleeing outside the city would only put one in more danger, so they could abandon vehicles on the main roads to create a traffic jam and prevent anyone from rushing off in their private cars. Information from the traffic control center and help from the TV and radio broadcast stations were crucial to get the people to evacuate underground.

Their enemy was time. The fuse had already been lit.

So they did not have time for arguing. If it came to it, they would “convince” people with the muzzle of a gun. Every second or hour wasted could mean game over and the Jack in the Box would turn everything to ash.

“Being a hero ain’t easy…”

“I could never trust some idiot who introduces themselves as a hero in full-body tights who’s perfect and above reproach. I can only assume they’ve gone around killing everyone who had a problem with them.”

The tied-up sheriff was pale and trembling, but he managed to force out a voice.

“I-I won’t talk! I’m not going to help some Legitimacy Kingdom berserkers. Even if the Faith Organization helps us out with food and temporary factory work, we’re still a civilian-ruled pacifist city!!”

“Now this guy is a true ally of the people. But how are we supposed to convince him, Heivia? Without violence, I mean.”

“It violates military regulations, but showing him all the photos of the Jack in the Box would probably be fastest. Or maybe tell him about the hexavalent chromium or what the mine detector kept picking up. Let’s bet on how many photos before he has a change of heart.”

“I’ll go with 10. Loser takes the winner’s next toilet-cleaning duty.”

“You sure believe in his pacifist conscience. I was thinking it would only take 5.”

The sheriff must have thought they were going to show him a pile of scorched corpses because he grew as white as a sheet. Heivia lifted him by the collar and sighed.

“Hey, old man. You mentioned temporary factory work, right?”

“…I won’t talk.”

“Then shut up and listen. The Faith Organization has set up giant circus-like tents for the local people to work in temporary factories. It’s simple work that creates Object parts. Yes, they have you making those gigantically huge springs.”

“…”

The sheriff looked on the verge of tears as he turned toward Quenser this time.

Quenser too shook his head.

“Just listen. Steel’s properties change based on the impurities mixed in. For example, chromium. Get the ratio just right and you have stainless steel, but the Faith Organization is using hexavalent chromium. We’ve found it in the soil around here, so there’s no doubting it.”

“Wh-what does…what does that matter…?”

“You didn’t know? No, you probably weren’t told.”

Quenser spat the words out toward someone who was not here. He wrinkled his brow like he had a headache as he continued.

“Hexavalent chromium causes serious damage to the environment. Most safe countries have emissions limits on it. That’s why they’re making their parts out here where it doesn’t count. And polluting your bodies all the while.”

The fat sheriff’s throat caught, but no voice came out.

His face was soaked with sweat. No, was that even sweat by his eyes?

“Have any of the people working in the factories suddenly disappeared?”

The nightmarish revelation continued.

“I don’t know how they’ve been explaining that away for you, but the truth is simple: when someone’s body gets too polluted, they collapse.”

“That can’t be true…”

“Unfortunately, our metal detectors won’t stop going off. I don’t know if it’s pocket change or wristwatches, but it’s definitely not mines or empty cans. We didn’t like driving over them, so we tried to avoid the areas where the bodies were buried as much as we could.”

“You’re lying!!”

The sheriff cut in with a sudden shout. He grabbed something at his neck and clenched his teeth. What was this wounded animal of a man wearing there? Quenser remembered.

It was a necklace made from a ring on a thin chain.

Something like that would produce a metal reaction. So could it be…?

“That can’t be. That can’t be, that can’t be, that can’t be!! I mean…that’s…this city is built on the Faith Organization’s good will…she was…and the technicians…and the factory chiefs…they’re only at the hospital…that’s why they aren’t here…uuh… I’ll see her again soon…she’ll be all better any day now…ahhh…waaaaahhhhh!!”

He was so confused that he could not even produce intelligible language toward the end.

Too many examples may have come to mind. But if he accepted it, something would break inside him, so he was struggling to deny it with all his might.

“Hey, is this really the right thing to do, Quenser?”

“It is. It’s right, but it isn’t anything more than that.”

The teenage boys had a complex look in their eyes as they watched a man more than twice their age have a complete breakdown. They had done and seen something they should not have. That was how it felt to them.

But they could not place a hand on those trembling shoulders.

Because something else happened first.

A deafening explosion erupted in one corner of the city and unhealthy-looking black smoke stained the sky.

It was not that far away. Only two or three buildings from them. The noise hit them like a solid wall, so Quenser was nearly knocked from his feet and clung to the side of a nearby truck.

A high-pitched monotone sound rang in his ears as Heivia opened the bulletproof truck’s door, used it as a shield, and moved his mouth. Quenser could not hear his voice, but based on his lip movements, he seemed to be asking what idiot had done that.

“That was from the hangar market. And it would’ve been full of housewives at this time.”

When sound returned to him, the first voice Quenser heard was the fat sheriff who should have still been on the ground.

“Oh, right. The Faith Organization will know. They’ll know the secret behind the hexavalent chromium and the factories!!”

“Ah, you dumbass!!”

Heivia reached out his hand, but he just barely missed the man’s shoulder. With a mysterious burst of energy, the civilian slipped away and ran toward the explosion. The ring swayed as it hung from his neck like dog tags.

Did he want to learn the truth, or to deny it?

“Oh, hell. What do we-…argh, stop already, dammit!!”

Quenser’s awful friend aimed his assault rifle at the man, but the threat was powerless against someone who was throwing their life away. Holding up someone who you could not afford to kill had no effect whatsoever.

Heivia clicked his tongue and glanced over at the four-wheel-drive truck, but then Quenser took off running after the middle-aged man.

He was not exactly confident in his athletic ability, so it was mostly his lack of a driver’s license that helped make up his mind.

“C’mon, Heivia! That guy might be stupid, but he hasn’t done anything wrong!! Not one thing!!”

“Okay, fine!!”

Heivia reluctantly gave up on the truck and ran after the sheriff.

He may have decided running full speed was faster than turning the key to start the engine for a distance of only two or three buildings.

“But what was that explosion!? Did someone from our 37th go berserk!?”

“It didn’t sound like our equipment!!”

So was it the Faith Organization? Or had someone acquired weapons from them?

A voice amplified by a megaphone reached them from beyond the buildings.

“Beloved lost sheep!! Our hateful enemy, the Legitimacy Kingdom, has arrived!

Your parents and your children, your lovers and your families, your friends and your teachers!! If you wish to protect all that you hold dear, take a weapon and protect those threatened lives!!”

“Did the bastards fake an attack to stir up hostility against us!?”

“Even if it doesn’t wholly succeed, it might create a gray zone where no one knows which side did it. In that case, any riots could be directed at us too. We have to do something and soon!”

All the surrounding houses shut their doors and windows.

A cellphone fell from overhead when someone dropped it while shutting a second-story window. It was vibrating in silent mode and, when they grabbed it to check the small screen, they saw an emergency email from the Faith Organization.

“This could hardly get worse…”

“We don’t have time to complain. We just have to solve one thing at a time. Starting with that sheriff!!”

The silo city had been developed down into the depths, so tall buildings did not seem to act as a status symbol. They pursued the sheriff while surrounded by small buildings that stood only three or four stories tall. Meanwhile, they heard more explosions and what sounded an awful lot like gunfire.

“It’s the Legitimacy Kingdom! The Legitimacy Kingdom is attacking!! Get the women and children indoors!! I repeat, make sure you get the women and children indoors!! You never know what they’ll do!!”

“They have some nerve saying that when they’re lying to the people’s faces and polluting them with hexavalent chromium…!”

An armored truck covered with speakers (presumably for proselytizing) drove by, so Quenser and Heivia quickly hid behind cover. The fat man was nearby, gasping for breath and trying to chase down the mass of steel.

“Has that idiot completely lost it? He’s trying to stop an armored truck all on his own!! Is he not afraid of a heavy machinegun or grenades!?”

“I think he still wants to trust the Faith Organization. He’s afraid of reality catching up to him. He thinks everything will fall apart if he feels fear here.”

“If we don’t catch him soon, he really will end up as mincemeat! Why do I have to

chase after some sweaty fatass and tackle him to the ground when it's so damn hot!? This is the worst!!"

"We're the ones that made him feel so cornered, so we can't let him die."

The source of the black smoke turned out to be a large shopping mall. The boxy building appeared to be two or three stories tall and it may have had as large an area as a domed stadium. And that meant it had a large parking lot with nothing to use as cover. There was only one word for this situation where they could be targeted from any direction: shitty.

"A-ahhh, ahhh, ahhh!! He's running right down the middle of the parking lot! Is he *trying* to get himself killed!?"

"No, wait. There's something el-…"

Quenser was cut off by the sound of thick tires digging into the ground. A Legitimacy Kingdom military truck screeched to a halt right in front of the two idiots. The khaki-colored mass had a thick heavy machinegun on the roof and small Myonri sat in the driver's seat.

That star member of the 37th gestured upwards and shouted to them.

"Use this as a shield to get closer! We've sent some drones out, so we can draw the enemy fire until the aerial footage has marked the enemy's location!!"

But Heivia did not listen at all and climbed up the wall to the machinegun on the roof. He sprayed armor-piercing rounds toward the armored truck trying to turn around in the parking lot and it was torn apart like a plastic toy.

But that was as far as he got.

The bastard kicked the driver's seat headrest through the opening in the roof and yelled a warning to Myonri.

"Get out!!"

Quenser simply stood there throughout. Myonri rushed out of the door and Heivia jumped down from the roof.

Immediately afterwards, the armored military truck was blown to smithereens.

The close-range blast really did knock Quenser from his feet this time. He saw the burning scrap metal bounce once and then roll, so he did not have time to choke. He half-crawled half-rolled to move as far along the scorching asphalt as possible

to avoid being flattened.

It was lucky he had been breathing out. If he had been breathing in when the explosive flames swelled out, his trachea and lungs would have been fried.

“Oh…gh…”

But what had that been? It had come from a different direction than the armored truck turning around in the parking lot.

His fingertips were almost convulsing as he reached out his hand, but Heivia grabbed that hand and pulled him to his feet.

“We need to hurry behind that exhibitionist of a nude statue! We have to use that concrete pedestal to shield us from the second blast! Hurry!!”

“Wha-?”

Quenser was still confused after being practically dragged behind cover, so sooty Heivia shouted an explanation.

“That was an elastic grenade launcher! Those are anti-tank weapons that use a thick coil spring inside a launch tube! It’s just a spring, but they can still launch a grenade 500 meters. And since they don’t use an explosive to launch it, there isn’t any sound or smoke. They have their downsides, such as an unstable ballistic path and a reload time of more than two minutes, but nothing could be a bigger pain in the ass for a surprise attack!!”

The spring weapon reminded Quenser of something.

“So it really is the Faith Organization!?”

“More importantly, what do we do? If we’re pinned here, the sheriff and the others are done for…”

Myonri’s question reminded him of something else.

“About that. Isn’t there way too little blood for a civilian city being hit by military might?”

“…Huh?”

Confused, Myonri observed the large parking lot once more. Sure enough, some cars had caught on fire, but there was no sign of any bodies. Housewives and employees were fleeing the shopping mall which was large enough to contain a

school building or gym, but none of them were shot in the back as they ran around the open space of the parking lot.

Quenser looked back to the exhibitionist statue's pedestal. It had a metal plate bearing the words "Wide Area Wartime Shelter".

"The Faith Organization is guiding the people too. The gunfire and explosions are only meant to scare them."

"But what for!?"

"To ensure the people are worried about their basic necessities instead of starting a riot! To take back the hearts of the people! A wide area wartime shelter should have plenty of food, water, blankets, and tents, so if they take over this shopping mall, they can control at least the ten thousand people on the silo city's surface!"

"So they're destroying everything themselves and then handing out supplies? Will that really work?"

"Didn't you know that most war reconstruction is funded by the winner? No matter how unreasonable the situation, people will accept it if they can get back to their normal lives. So we have to stop this no matter what. If that sheriff keeps asking about his ring and the truth behind the hexavalent chromium, he might be treated like an irregularity. In other words, they'll pull the trigger and silence him with a bang."

"Yeah, but how do we get across this parking lot that's larger than a soccer field!? You saw that elastic grenade launcher blast! Even a full-body combat cyborg would be blown to bits!!"

"Heivia, where do you think the Faith Organization is firing from?"

"Huh? Since there are burning cars scattered around the parking lot, wouldn't it be from the flat roof of that shopping mall? Not that we can see them from down here."

"Myonri, you said you sent some drones out, didn't you? You were planning to work with the operator to locate the enemy, but can you still contact them?"

"Y-yes. With the parallel processing machines out of order, the electronic simulation division was fighting over the control panel like at an arcade."

"Then have all the drones drop straight down. Onto the shopping mall's flat roof." Quenser quickly made up his mind. "It doesn't matter if you hit them or not. We'll run across while the Faith Organization is looking up into the air in fear of an

attack. We can run 50m in seven seconds with full gear, right?”

The attack began.

Sturdy crane flies two sizes bigger than the ones sold at electronics stores and online stores grew visible as they dropped down one after another.

Quenser clicked his tongue as he ran out from behind cover.

“Tch, you could’ve put more of a time delay between them! That alone would’ve extended this distraction!!”

“Wait, are we seriously doing this!?”

The sudden start left Heivia initially cautious, but this was their only chance. Screw it up and they would be forever pinned behind the exhibitionist statue’s pedestal.

The enemy must not have been all that frightened because short bursts of gunfire continued even while they were panicking. Orange sparks burst from the asphalt nearby, but they could not stop now that they had started running. They could not risk anyone being hit by a stray bullet, so they avoided the glass door letting people out and instead ran toward the nearest section of the shopping mall’s wall even though there was no entrance there.

Heivia had started running after Quenser, but he easily passed the other boy.

“Elastic grenade launcher!!”

A man in a military uniform leaned out from the edge of the flat roof and supported something like a rocket launcher on his shoulder. Even if he missed by a bit, they would be caught in the blast. And leaping away from the blast would not be enough to avoid it.

However, a drone fell straight on top of him.

Even if it was lightweight, it still had a military-grade aluminum frame. And when falling from high enough, even a pinball could become a deadly weapon. The Faith Organization soldier was hit by the drone’s sports car-like frame, his helmet and skull split open, and the explosive was launched in a harmless direction.

Quenser’s group had finally reached the mall’s wall, but they did not stop there. The wall was made of glass and an industrial wrapping sheet had been placed over that to keep the light out. They tackled the glass, broke through, and rolled into the shop.

Among a row of registers, Heivia ran over to a shocked Faith Organization soldier who was surprisingly close by. He swept the enemy's feet out from under him and fired his assault rifle at point blank range.

"Goddammit, do we have to fight an indoor battle against who-even-knows how many people!?"

"?"

That was when Quenser heard something crinkle underfoot.

He moved his boot and found a scrap of paper with a bloody footprint on it.

"Warning from the Venerable Elder: The final battle with the Legitimacy Kingdom devils draws nigh."

"You're kidding, right? Are they still spreading their faith during all this!?"

"Honestly, wasn't that what they were after the whole time?"

They could still hear the megaphone voice outside, but it was echoing too much to understand anything it said anymore.

Heivia had to groan.

"The value of god tends to skyrocket when you're faced with a threat you can't handle yourself. That's why they've created their own catastrophe so the teachings of god will sink in more easily. It's easier to spread your faith in unstable times than in times of peace."

That was also why they had started a battle between Objects right in the middle of the tense standoff between the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance.

That created enough tension to feel like the end of the world was approaching.

But they also made sure the threat was just small enough to avoid the actual destruction.

"B-but," asked Myonri. "Will these people really be swayed by their claims if they're only saving the people from the weapons they themselves fired???"

"What you see as the truth relies a lot on your point of view. They're claiming the Legitimacy Kingdom is causing all the trouble and the Faith Organization is going out of their way to do the dirty work needed to evacuate everyone to safety. And

they'll probably explain away their insurgents violently taking over the mall by calling it a planned redistribution of personnel. In emergencies, the people with guns will grow bolder and the people without guns will want to rely on them. They might just be able to remake themselves from conquerors to dark heroes."

Anyone could figure out which side was telling the truth if they compared all the data and rationally analyzed it, but the people caught in the middle had essentially been thrown into a giant three-dimensional maze. Only people like Quenser's group who had military connections could prepare the kind of environment needed to find the answer.

"This is not going to be fun… Once they pass a certain point, they might create a sort of 'atmosphere'. Enough people will be saying it's true to silence those with doubts and everyone will just go along with it."

"B-but this is a silo city of hundreds of thousands of people if you count the underground portion."

"There's only about ten thousand on the surface and they're something like a small village society cut off from the rest of the world. I just hope this doesn't get as out of hand as the Salem witch trials."

Just then, they saw someone running by the home carpentry shelves while giving no thought to lines of fire or cover. He had already broken the rules, but he seemed to seriously believe no bullet would hit him.

"It's that panicked sheriff!"

"We can talk later! We need to restrain him first!"

Quenser shoved a nearby shopping cart into empty space so the eyes and guns on the first floor and the atrium's second floor would focus on it. Heivia and Myonri fired on the unnatural movements that produced while they also charged from the register area to the home carpentry section.

"From this, I'm guessing they haven't taken over the security room and gotten control of the security cameras."

"More importantly, that fatso. Damn, why couldn't it be a revolver-worshiping cute gunman girl in tight shorts? This is really affecting my motivation!!"

Heivia's hands finally reached the sheriff.

He grabbed the man's shoulders, spun him around, and prepared to slam him to the floor again, but Myonri held her small submachinegun out toward a shelf of

power tools.

There was a burst of gunfire, but she did not stop moving. Before Quenser could voice his confusion, the shelf collapsed toward them. By the time he realized it had been tackled from the other side, Heivia and the sheriff were trapped beneath it.

Quenser fell on his butt and just barely avoided the same fate because Myonri pulled him back with her empty hand. She then faced the Faith Organization soldier who had walked up the diagonally-collapsed shelf and was preparing to fire his assault rifle. She fired a 9mm bullet from her submachinegun onehanded.

But this was no time to adore that scene of a surprisingly active girl.

After breathing a sigh of relief and looking back, Quenser saw another Faith Organization uniform.

“Ah, ah, awahhh!?”

His mind went almost entirely blank and he slapped on Myonri’s calf, but the stubbly middle-aged man aimed his military shotgun before the boy could finish communicating the threat.

Just before everyone was turned to mincemeat, the shotgun man tripped and fell backwards. Spray paint cans had apparently tumbled out of the fallen shelf and the man had stepped on one.

This was his only chance.

Quenser tearfully leaped toward the fallen soldier. Quenser was on top, but the man used just his arm strength to punch the boy in the bridge of the nose and the boy’s vision grew white. Instead of looking for a weapon, his searching hands were looking for some kind of support to keep him from collapsing backwards, but they happened across a rough device. And instead of a unit for sale, this was apparently a display unit used for instore demonstrations.

It was a chainsaw meant for chopping down trees.

“Ah.”

Already, the Faith Organization man was slipping out from under Quenser and pulling a handgun from the holster at his hip. It would take less than three seconds to flick off the safety with his thumb and take aim. Quenser needed to go all out if he was to survive. Even a moment’s hesitation would mean death. At any rate, he had no time. And unfortunately, his opponent was not a cute and sickly

little sister. It was just some macho man.

He had his answer: His own life took precedence here!

“No…I’m really not that cruel a person…ah, ah, ahhhh

“(What are you doing here? You’re the commander, aren’t you!?)”

“(You pawns didn’t do your job, so the king was caught in the firefight. And Quenser, what happened with you? Did you get caught in some kind of ritual!?)”

The gunfire continued.

In fact, it seemed to be intensifying.

“(Be on your guard, everyone.)”

On Frolaytia’s instructions, the two teams climbed the gently curving stairs. This seemed to be a section for children’s toys. But that meant things like plastic trains and train tracks, not video games.

They heard some kind if argument.

One side seemed to be that sheriff. But who was the other side?

“What is this about hexavalent chromium? Why do metal detectors go off in the ground around here!? You’re with the Faith Organization, so you have to know the answer!!”

“Shut up! Can’t you tell we have more important matters to deal with!?”

“More important matters!? Do our lives mean nothing to you!?”

“So it didn’t take root in you. Then I’ll show you what happened to those people… by doing the same to you!!”

Heivia and Frolaytia clicked their tongues and started forward.

Just as they entered the children’s toy section, they came to a stop.

A colorful world awaited them there.

Being a fancy toy section was not necessarily a good thing.

Couldn’t a cute mascot look creepy depending on where it was located? For example, seeing the head of a mascot costume at an abandoned amusement park, seeing a mascot sign for a pharmacy or cake shop in the garbage dump, or seeing a stuffed animal floating in a muddy river.

This was an extreme version of that.

The Faith Organization soldiers were sliced despite their bulletproof jackets and they collapsed with blood erupting from their wounds.

And the smiling dress-up dolls and mascots had all that red liquid dumped over them.

This death was not brought by bullets or bombs.

Some were stabbed and others were sliced diagonally.

The battle still raged on.

On one side was the Faith Organization armed with short-barrel carbines and grenade launchers. On the other side was a mysterious group carrying assault rifles that decorated cutting-edge weapons with old-fashioned wooden stocks and bayonets.

However, neither of those were the crux of the issue.

“…What the hell…?”

Heivia observed through his assault rifle’s sight and his fingertips seemed frozen in place. That was how much difficulty his brain was having processing the sight.

It was a katana.

That single silver blade was taking life after life.

At the center of the mysterious group was a silver-haired man wielding an Island Nation sword. He wore a glossy black tailcoat that looked better fit for a stage magician than the host of an evening party and most certainly did not suit a wasteland of dried stone and cactuses. The hands holding the hilt were even covered by white gloves.

Normally thinking, a sword had no way of defeating guns. But when this man danced, the Faith Organization soldiers equipped with the latest gear were cut down with bizarre ease. When one soldier tried to put together a spring-powered anti-tank weapon, the warhead was sliced in two. Others were decapitated when their necks were horizontally slashed since they tended to have little to no bulletproof gear there.

Quenser was overwhelmed by that storm of blood, but Heivia noticed something and frowned.

“Wait…it isn’t that this katana guy is super skilled. The bayonet group is using their bullets to move the Faith Organization into range of his blade. They’re like hunting dogs driving the prey out of the bushes.”

That meant this was a stage prepared for the tailcoat man to enjoy hitting an enemy whenever he swung his sword. He got to live out his knightly fantasy of a sword defeating guns.

Which side were they supposed to target first?

There was no time to hesitate. The last Faith Organization soldier kicked away the sheriff clinging to him, tried to hide behind cover, and was pinned in place by bullets. Then he was cut down as the store shelf he was using as cover was sliced diagonally through by the katana.

That was a frightening demonstration of skill, but it was also an opportunity.

When you grasped victory, were freed from the tension, and breathed a sigh of relief was exactly when the grim reaper would smile your way on the battlefield.

“(Split up, fire on them from two directions, and drive them to the window. But don’t hit the sheriff on the floor there. If we don’t give them freedom to move, we can manage…)”

Heivia tried to communicate with the others using hand signals, but then Frolaytia raised a hand. The military was a vertically structured society. If their commanding officer intervened, they had to obey no matter what.

“O…”

Frolaytia was the one who finally spoke.

The sadistic, busty, and silver-haired commander sounded confused as she spoke to the tailcoat young man who took an almost transparently thin piece of Island Nation paper from one of the bayonet soldiers who apparently worked for him, folded the paper in two over the back of the katana blade, and wiped off the blood and fat.

“Onii-chan, what are you doing here???”

That had done it.

All the rules governing humanity had collapsed.

Part 7

Everything was blown from the idiots’ minds: that they were in the Greater Canyon where the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance stared each other down, that the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization were in conflict, that the silo city was in danger, and even that an old-fashioned blade had defeated rifle bullets and anti-tank weapons.

Onii-chan.

Had that busty old woman really used that cutesy Island Nation term!!???

“Why!? There’s something wrong with this! You can’t just suddenly claim you’re a little sister character when you look like that! Even if every cute twintail girl will eventually grow up into a wrinkly old hag!!”

“I won’t accept this! I refuse to let anyone with an F-cup or higher call herself a little sister!! Mine’s pretty bad too, but what are you!? A bamboo shoot that grew too much and turned into full-on bamboo!?”

“What was that you slipped in there about ‘mine’!? Wait, were you bragging!?”

“She doesn’t count as a little sister!!”

While the two idiots argued and fought over this unfair world and while even a worrier like Myonri stopped paying any attention to them, Frolaytia looked as awkward as a child who had seen her parent during parent day at school.

But then someone provided a verbal finishing blow.

One of his bodyguards – a woman who looked like a maid or a tutor – held out a handkerchief, so the gentleman wiped the sweat from his face as he spoke.

“Hello, hello. Nice to meet you. I am Bloodrics Capistrano. From the look of things, can I assume you have been looking after my cute little sister?”

“Onii-chan.”

The young man smiled cheerfully while surrounded by sliced corpses.

The bodyguards around him seemed to be maids and tutors, but he had likely selected them on a different basis than a perverted old man with too much money would. Some were gray-haired women and others were young children, so he must have selected them based purely on skills ranging from housework to combat instead of looks or age.

His black tailcoat was exactly the sort of out-of-touch outfit one would expect of a noble and he returned the cleaned white blade to its sheath with practiced hand.

“The Capistrano family has been male for generations, so a girl like Tia-chan is quite rare. All of her brothers were always fighting over her, so we ended up quite knowledgeable in fighting etiquette. Although I am sure I made a fool of myself in front of professionals like you.”

“Tia-chan? Did he say Tia-chan!?”

A stir ran through the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers and Quenser blankly muttered a comment.

“Your sibling fights were always on this level…???”

“I never want to have a noble’s duel with them. They’re sure to have their maids tackle me beforehand so I have to face them with a sprained ankle…”

When Frolaytia blushed and cleared her throat, the surrounding soldiers finally began searching the surrounding area. But as they had kind of expected, there were no Faith Organization soldiers left.

“Onii-…ahem…Bloodrics’s hobby is charity work. He has a bad habit of cutting a

family check as casually as someone tossing change into the donation box next to a convenience store register. It was only a safe country issue, but his actions once brought Barcelona a step away from independence."

"He takes independent action on a whim? What a pain in the ass!"

"D-don't say that. This is the kind of rich person you really don't want to make mad."

Quenser and Myonri said something, but Bloodrics himself did not seem to mind at all.

"By the way, Tia-chan, what is this odd smell in your hair? It's somewhat sweet but somewhat bitter."

"(Gulp!?)"

"That's right! Listen to this, Frolaytia's brother! She doesn't play fair at all! She won't let anyone else have any personal items, but she has her pi-…"

"Reward kick!!!!!!"

Seeing Heivia lifted 15cm from the ground thanks to a kick to the balls from behind, Quenser decided not to say anything like a reporter succumbing to powerful pressure.

"Ho…ho ho ho. The military can be so old-fashioned, so there are a lot of troublesome officers who smoke right in front of their subordinates. Maybe some of the smell got on me during the meeting we had earlier."

Frolaytia poked her index fingers together in front of her ample chest, gave her brother an upturned look, and fidgeted (while one of her men lay at her feet holding his crotch and looking as lifeless as a cicada shell).

"If you've left the safety of Paris to come to this chaotic place, I assume it's your usual disease. Onii-chan, didn't I tell you not to leave the safe countries!?"

"Hah hah hah. It is true I wanted to see my cute little sister at work, but that is not why I am here today. Did you know, Tia-chan, that there are children out there who do not have clean water to drink?"

"How many times have I told you that more than 60% of those silly banner ads are from scammers!? Not to mention that you give them so much money that they stand out too much in the underworld and are eventually destroyed over it!!"

“What are you talking about, Tia-chan? That means the remaining 40% are actually from people in need. Instead of worrying over the result of each individual one, you need to think about how you’re bound to help someone eventually.”

As a commoner, Quenser started staring into the distance. This was someone who had never had to put in an honest day’s work in his life. The amount of money involved was too great for scammers to handle, so he might as well have been dropping bombs made from stacks of cash.

Then Frolaytia’s men found something while searching the area.

Since this was the toy section for small children, there was a large multi-use bathroom nearby which could be used for changing diapers. Three blonde girls were escorted out of there.

Their hairstyles were different, but their facial features were startlingly similar. They were probably triplets.

“Oh. Those three are the managers of the charity site operating in this silo city. This is Rica, Alisa, and Orsia. Um…but which was which again???”

Bloodrics tried to introduce them yet ended up confused, but the trio did not seem to mind. They were wearing matching red tank tops and miniskirts that made them look like a cheerleader-style dance team, so they may have been accustomed to being mistaken for each other.

“I had no real plans here. This was just an offline meeting.”

“An offline meeting? Is that why you’re wearing that party outfit, you out-of-touch idiot? And this isn’t a café or a karaoke box; it’s the Greater Canyon trapped between the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance home countries…”

“Everywhere is the same, Tia-chan. For the earth is round!!”

“Oh, shut up!!”

It was neat seeing this new side to Frolaytia, but this was not something they could just ignore. It was clear now that Bloodrics really was the older brother and Frolaytia really was the younger sister. Compared side by side, the busty silver-haired commander looked downright sensible.

And a few phrases had caught Quenser’s attention, so he hesitantly raised a hand.

“If Frolaytia’s brother was having an offline meeting here, does that mean this silo

city was preparing to declare independence?”

“Well, this was already a blank zone, so it didn’t belong to any of the world powers in the first place. But they were actually rather reliant on the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance. And the people of this city seem to think they have grown independent by doing support work for the Faith Organization, but that is not true either. So I thought opening a proper air hole here and giving them true independence from external influence would help both the world and the people here.”

“Was it those girls there who planted this information in my stupid brother’s head!? How much money did you take from our bank account!?”

“Hmm,” groaned Quenser as he looked up at the ceiling (and ignored Major Capistrano’s desperation).

And he got right to the point.

“Wouldn’t that get in the way of the Faith Organization’s disposable personnel acquisition scheme they’re using to make their springs out of toxic hexavalent chromium?”

Part 8

Once he finally recovered from the intense pain, Heivia rejoined the conversation.

They still did not know what the Faith Organization was hoping to accomplish with all this violence, but aside from the hexavalent chromium factories, it had been suggested that they could spread their faith more easily if they created the perfect amount of tension to lead people to cling to a god.

“If the Jack in the Box’s unit is moving north to south along the Greater Canyon while taking over the silo cities and dyeing them in their own colors…wouldn’t they be directly opposed to what Bloodrics’s group is trying to do?”

If the people could gain independence through something other than faith, they would stop gathering at the Faith Organization factories. Then the Faith Organization would lose their means of constructing powerful weaponized springs out of hexavalent chromium.

They were trying to (quite forcibly) take control of the shopping mall that had been designated a wide area wartime shelter, but controlling the people's hearts with various supplies was only the means. A lot was still unknown about the actual objective they were hoping to accomplish with that.

What if they had some other plans there?

"What if their intelligence agency learned about that offline meeting between Bloodrics and…those triplets? Couldn't they have stirred up all this chaos to cause a panic and rid themselves of that nuisance???"

"…"

When Frolaytia put her hands on her hips and started glaring at him, the katana-wielding brother in a tailcoat grew flustered at the sudden reversal of positions.

"I-I am relieved to see you have such skilled people at your disposal, Tia-chan."

"Is that all you have to say for yourself?"

"But what was I supposed to do!? I'm a civilian! I connect a commercial computer up to a router from the ISP and protect myself by updating the OS and security software. What else could I do!?"

"If you can only protect your data like that, you shouldn't be getting involved in dangerous battlefield countries full of professionals!!"

"Oh, but I did set up a…was it called a proxy server? You see, Rica and Orsia helped me out online and Arisa used a remote server to set up this confusing password for it all."

"Okay, okay. I get it, so shut up and let me punch you!!"

No one could quite figure out which part of this to comment on first, but they had to keep the conversation moving.

"But why is the Faith Organization so fixated on the silo cities?" asked Myonri with a tilt of the head. "I mean, I know they want those springs made from hexavalent chromium, but is that really all?"

"Mhu hu hu."

She was answered by a strange laugh.

They looked over to see one of the triplets in red cheerleader-style tank tops and

miniskirts…but which one was this? The ample curves barely contained by the tank top meant it was Rica or Arisa who was laughing with her hand over her mouth.

The three of them pressed their cheeks together as they spoke.

“It might be that new faith we’ve heard about☆”

“New…what???”

Quenser sounded skeptical, so the trio took turns moving their lovely lips.

“We have heard rumors of the hard labor used for the hexavalent chromium.”

“But the Faith Organization apparently hasn’t really been manipulating any information to twist how the people of the city explain away the people who collapse and disappear.”

“The people invent their own stories about the technicians and factory chiefs. The Faith Organization might be monitoring how people come to terms with the mysterious things occurring before their eyes. They see how the people protect the ‘myth of safety’ that they don’t want to fall apart.”

It may not have mattered which was which.

The three of them formed a single whole that provided opinions aimed in the same direction.

“So it did not matter to the Faith Organization if the truth came to light.”

“They wanted to see whether or not the present relationship would fall apart afterwards.”

“Yes, the people might say the workers’ noble sacrifices placed their souls in the Object’s main cannon so they could unleash their power to defeat their hated enemy. The Faith Organization wanted to see if that faith would take root in them.”

The triplets giggled as they explained just how horrific the Faith Organization was.

…But even if this was not confirmed, did it sound more in line with the Faith Organization’s way of doing things than the simple benefit of the springs?

The Faith Organization was in the extremely dangerous Greater Canyon where the Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance stared each other down and

they had risked pulling the trigger on the end of the world in order to take over these silo cities. Why? …People's souls reside in springs. It sounded absurd in isolation like that, but they had wanted to see if it would develop into a proper faith. And if need be, they would protect that faith…just not the people who held it.

This was a delicate time when the faith had yet to fully take root and it could go either way. It was possible the bubble could burst. The Faith Organization felt like a mother bird incubating its precious egg, so they would make sure they got the result they wanted even if it took some desperate measures.

"I can't believe this…" Heivia scratched his head. "This goes way deeper than I thought."

"This doesn't change what we need to do. We can bring this all to a close if we construct our maintenance base over the silo city and buy enough time to crush the Faith Organization's Jack in the Box."

Part 9

He had been left behind.

Sheriff Thomas Goldenclipper had been left behind by the rapid series of events.

It was true this was too much for him to handle.

A military clash between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization was not something he could solve with a six-shot revolver he had not fired since training. On a sheriff's paltry salary, he could not hope to match that rich noble who bombed people with checks or the triplet managers of a charity site.

What was the truth behind the Faith Organization's smiles?

Or the temporary factories that supported everyone's lives?

Or the hexavalent chromium?

Or the whereabouts of the ring that formed a pair with his?

The closer he approached the truth, the harder it was to bear. There was no hope

to be found anywhere. If it was this painful, it might have been easier to stop and curl up in a ball. He truly, truly, truly thought that. He believed he was only putting up a meaningless struggle that would not benefit him in the slightest.

But.

Even so…

"…Shut up…"

His voice was barely audible.

His knees were shaking while speaking to boys and girls who were not even half his age and could only be called children. Heat built up deep in his head and his tear ducts threatened to open.

But he said it.

He managed to say it. And once the first words left his mouth, he could see no reason to hold back.

"The Faith Organization's factories? The truth of the hexavalent chromium? They're waiting for us to start believing those are noble sacrifices and those people's souls live on in the Object? I don't know what you're talking about!! …I won't be swayed so easily! I won't just obey you! Sure, the Faith Organization has done some bad things, but that doesn't mean I'm going to side with the Legitimacy Kingdom!! Dammit, don't screw with us! We are human beings! Don't screw around with our lives!!"

The rule of law tended to be slow to act in blank zones not ruled by any of the four world powers. People's emotions tended to take precedence over explicit rules, so it was fairly common for people to take revenge after their lover was killed or the rich robbed them blind.

Idealism was useless here.

He knew that. He knew that all too well.

And yet…

"Listen!! No matter how painful it is – even if it feels like walking barefoot down a path of shattered glass – I will not stop!! Because it's my duty to protect the people of this city!! Laugh if you want! Hold your sides and have a nice guffaw about how powerless, fragile, and unrealistic I am!! But I still carry that duty! I'm a sheriff who carries the pride of this city's people with this badge on my chest! So I

will look this head-on no matter how painful it is. I will not look away! You hear me!? I *will not*!!!!!"

He had decided he would be a sheriff.

That reason might seem pathetic to people who had to think about the fate of the world, but he had still decided to take this path. He could not fire a gun very well and his belly had grown fat from so much coffee and donuts, but he had decided to make this a peaceful city and he had worked to that end until this very day.

How could he throw that out now?

If he could not be idealistic, who in this city could?

If a volcano erupted or a hurricane of unprecedented size blew in, there was no way for a sheriff to stop it. But could he abandon his duty just because there was nothing he could do? He still had to climb into his dented police car that had been fixed up until it was just barely presentable, he had to drive around, and he had to search for anyone who had failed to evacuate or anyone taking advantage of the situation to loot or steal.

"…This is our city."

How could he abandon his duty?

Someone important to him may have been poisoned to the marrow by a toxic substance and then buried in the wasteland as an expendable pawn. The more he thought about it, the more horrifying it was, but he still could not abandon his duty.

Who would collect their bones?

Who could search out the truth?

That obviously was not a job for some outsider soldiers.

It had to be the police or sheriffs with roots in that city.

"I don't care about the fate of the world or friction between the world powers!! Silo City – Giant Pizza is a peaceful city that promises its law-abiding residents a happy life! Listen, I won't let some outsider soldiers trample over the truth. I won't let you move this to war!! I will preserve the crime scene, reveal the truth, and arrest the perp. Because that's my job!!!!!"

His opinion may have been wholly unrealistic.

He may have only been stopping the series of events around him.

For one thing, there was no guarantee of the usual rules applying when the Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization had arrived with such extraordinary power. If someone here drew their gun and fired a shot between the foolish sheriff's eyes, it would likely end with no one being held responsible.

…He might die here.

He only now realized that, but he would not take back what he had said.

"I see. I can only assume you're prepared to back up those words with action."

The woman with long silver hair, who seemed to be the leader of these soldiers, turned a bit toward him.

And then something unexpected happened.

She brought her heels together, straightened her spine, and silently raised her right hand.

Someone who lived in an entirely different world saluted the fat sheriff with an entirely serious look on her face.

"We do not have time to prepare the official paperwork, so I can unfortunately only make a verbal agreement. Nevertheless, the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion will now place full authority of evacuating Silo City – Giant Pizza with the local police."

"Eh? Ah?"

"Here are the documents on the state of the city based on satellite and drone footage. And here are the documents on the population needing evacuation. I assume the local police would know this land better than us, but they might make useful reference material."

Thomas was utterly taken aback by this turn of events and the silver-haired commander winked at him while still saluting.

And with the slightly sweet aroma of smoke, her bewitching lips formed a smile.

"If you want to have your way, then keep at it to the end. If you think you can evacuate ten thousand people underground without any help from the military, then get to it. You can use that to get the better of us."

With that said, she turned around.

She gestured for her soldiers to leave with her and she grabbed her brother's ear as he watched on like he had played no part in this. Then she really did leave, dragging her brother along with her.

"…"

For a while, the sheriff forgot to even try to grasp what had just happened.

But he could not stand around forever.

This was a battle. It was a crucial battle over whether or not the people of this silo city could live proudly and without bowing down to anyone.

He had to preserve his dignity so they would not laugh and say "I told you so".

"I-I don't think I've ever been this busy!!"

Part 10

While following after their major (who was pulling on her brother's ear), Quenser and Heivia caused something of a commotion.

"Can you really just make that decision!? If the military isn't intervening in the silo city, then we can't place the maintenance base on top of it to fortify its defenses, can we!?"

"It's true this makes the silo city untouchable. But I said nothing about the area around it. We just have to surround it with our vehicles to form something like a fried egg. That still makes the place difficult to target for the Jack in the Box."

"…Are you serious? So we finally really *are'' acting as meat cushions…"*

"Onii-ch-…Bloodrics, you have your personal troops draw back into the city. Their classification only allows them to engage in battle for self defense and they're civilians, but they're equipped well enough that the enemy probably can't tell them apart from the 37th's normal troops from a distance. That is our only way of keeping our promise with that sheriff and also placing the maintenance base zone on top of the silo city."

“Ehh? Then who’s going to manage traffic on site!?”

It was said the military had formats and standards for everything, but things were not actually that tightly-controlled on site. Having the timetable fall to pieces due to a superior’s independent decision or prejudice was as much a problem for civil servants as it was for workers at an exploitative business.

But no matter what reason the higher ups had and even if you were to blame, no one wanted to make up for the resultant delay.

Despite saying she would not interfere with civilian matters, Frolaytia stuffed her brother into a truck and gave a harsh order to the subordinates she trusted to have her back.

“Figure out how to make this work.”

“How much must you exploit us!!!???”

“Don’t forget that your life is on the line too, you busty commander!”

Incidentally, the charity site manager triplets did not stick with Bloodrics and seemed intent on following the sheriff’s instructions to evacuate. This seemed to be the end of their offline meeting.

With the sheriff and Bloodrics’s “civilian” troops looking after the silo city, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes boarded their military vehicles. Quenser and Heivia were separated from Myonri.

“This is the worst! I thought having that cutie around would help soothe the pain!! And if that busty commander is going to work us to death, she could at least wear a bikini while she does it!!”

“…Huh? Was that why she was dressed as a cow bikini cowgirl? Am I more loved than I thought???”

“Okay, I’ve heard enough. It’s time to die, Quenser!!!!!!”

Their struggle led to the truck swerving, crashing into a telephone pole, and denting its bumper, so the two idiots calmed down quite quickly.

The repentant wise men spoke once more.

“How about we take this war seriously?”

“Yes, let’s bring peace to the world, shall we?”

In a way, the idiots were in their most dangerous state as they left the city and entered the battlefield.

It truly was a wasteland.

Specifically, they were to the south of Giant Pizza. Their formation there was meant to stop the attacking Faith Organization unit.

A green land had failed to become a desert covered in fine sand, so it had instead become a scorching wasteland covered in cracked earth and stones with the color of brick. In places, a long river had deeply eroded the earth, creating different shelf-like levels of land.

As they drove their trucks through a land with only cactuses and unfamiliar weeds growing on it, their radios received a transmission.

“Baby Magnum to all. My movement seems to have drawn in the Faith Organization. I have confirmed the Jack in the Box’s presence. The rest will be a race against time.”

“Let’s settle this by sunset and get out of the base tonight. I mean, the city’s called Giant Pizza, so I’ve gotta have at least a slice before leaving here.”

“I’m eating an eight inch olive and anchovy one right now.”

“Already!? And isn’t that a little big for a girl to eat on her own!?”

“Try playing a chess master while being shaken by extreme inertial Gs. Then you’ll understand. Your mind and body both need carbs.”

While holding that conversation, Quenser mentally sorted through what they had to do.

Their job here was to support the Baby Magnum.

The enemy Jack in the Box was an Object that used powerful springs and its main cannon was a metal shell cannon that concentrated the combined force of eight arms on a single point, just like a collapsible parabolic antenna or an umbrella frame. Instead of storing shells in a magazine or cartridges, liquid lead was released from the tip of the floats and wrapped around the base of the main cannon until it had the proper thickness in a baumkuchen-like shape.

It had incredible power, but it had a separate tail-like unit to negate the recoil of firing. The tail could move freely along a guiderail placed along the back 180 degrees of the spherical main body and it used a powerful spring to fire a giant

stake. The stake was either fired in the opposite direction of the main cannon to negate the recoil or it was fired into the ground for a quick dash that would have been impossible for its static electricity propulsion system.

In other words, the Jack in the Box could not withstand its main cannon's recoil without that tail.

If they prevented the tail pile bunker from functioning properly, it would be unable to control the force it created itself and it would roll over.

"Now that a lot of the wasteland's sand is up in the air, we have to mix in some vaporized epoxy adhesive to change the viscosity of the air, right?"

"If we change the force of the tail pile bunker's kick, it can't keep its balance when it fires its main cannon. If a stronger kick than expected causes it to topple over, then we win."

Keeping something as large as an Object afloat was an impressive feat in and of itself, but a static electricity system like the Baby Magnum's was a worse match than an aircushion system that directly blew out air. To ensure this worked, they had thick chains hanging out the back of the trucks to drag along the ground as they drove.

"Wow, it's like we're in the middle of a sandstorm. It's gotten so dark."

"I guess it's time to get the adhesive mixed into all that sand."

"This is all based on the ideal outcome, right? Will this really stop the Object?"

"You can complain after seeing for yourself."

Just as they were discussing that, something happened.

Something massive tore through the air and instantly blew away that thick wall of sand.

"The main…cannon!?"

"Quenser, you idiot! You'll bite your tongue!!"

They did not have time to just sit around watching.

It did not matter how skillfully Heivia operated the steering wheel when all four of the truck's wheels left the ground. It fell on its side and then rolled a total of fourteen times.

Their view was now upside down and they could hear a transmission from the Baby Magnum, the one part of their force that had survived.

“Contact with Jack in the Box confirmed. Engaging.”

“Dammit…”

Heivia kicked open the driver’s side door and got out.

There was no cloud of dust or adhesive. They had lost the curtain that should have obscured their vision as the 50m Object and its simple main cannon stirred up the air. They also had no way of setting up that situation themselves. They could tell the eight arms were gathering strength in their springs and the sprayers at the tip of the floats were releasing liquid lead to form the baumkuchen-shaped shell at the base of the main cannon column.

“Get the hell out here too, you idiot! Quenser!! I’ve seen for myself, so it’s time for me to complain! You really are the worst, you know that!?”

“Th-that’s odd. I thought the electronic simulation division had calculated everything out…”

“Their computers are still on the fritz, so they’ve been doing it all pen-and-paper. That probably introduced some kind of error.”

Quenser was the one who had not completely fixed the hub for the parallel machines, so in a roundabout way, he could not even complain to anyone else about it.

The very first move had betrayed their expectations.

The two Objects were firing back and forth at a distance of two or three kilometers, which was close range for an Object battle, but if they let the hectically-changing flow of time leave them behind, their lives were undoubtedly over. If they wanted to live, they had to come up with another plan.

Quenser grabbed his radio.

“Epoxy Team!! Are your sprayers made from air-conditioning units still working? If so, get them ready!!”

“This is Myonri. Um, our truck’s tires were blown, but the device itself should still work.”

“We’ll meet up with you, so tell us where you are.”

Heivia's eyes widened as he listened in.

"Are you continuing with that failed plan!? There's no way to get all the dust up in the air!!"

"That's not what I'm doing." Quenser was breathing heavily even while sitting on the ground. "That static electricity propulsion device has to be spreading a repellant ahead of it. Creating an electric repulsive force between the ground and the Object is how both the Baby Magnum and the Jack in the Box stay afloat."

"Why does that matt-…you crazy son of a bitch."

"We spread the adhesive spray near the ground to clog up their sprayer. And once it's stopped, the Princess can blow it away with her main cannons!"

They did not have to stop the Jack in the Box as fully as a car with blown tires or a stalled engine. As long as it had trouble for just a few seconds, the Princess's straight right could accurately break the macho man's jaw.

"The surface is too risky. The ground is full of thick cracks, like a cookie someone dropped on the floor. Let's climb in there to make our way along."

"When the shaking of each cannon blast causes them to close up? We'd meet a worse fate than a worker caught in an industrial press!"

The two idiots complained as they crouched low and ran along the wasteland where two colossal weapons were duking it out. Myonri was waiting for them at her damaged truck. It did not matter if she was not as busty as Frolaytia or as beautiful as the Princess. A short, cute, and well-behaved girl was more than enough! Those Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes came preinstalled with an extremely high-level homing function that would hunt down anywhere with nice-smelling girls, no matter where that might be!!

"Hey, are you still alive!? Here are some reinforcements to reward you for clenching your teeth and sticking it out this long!!"

"I don't care if it's just Myonri! There's something missing in my life if I don't have someone firmly stepping on me!"

But after working up a sweat with fear squeezing at their hearts, those guys only found an empty and broken truck with a canopy over the back. Stones were scattered around from a cannon blast that must have scored a direct hit to the front. The windshield had shattered and the bumper was unbelievably dented. There was a simple winch on the front that made use of the truck's horsepower,

but it too had been crushed and the finger-thick wire had been partially expelled.

And a hastily scratched-out note had been left on the side of the military truck.

“This is looking really bad, so we’re getting out of here. Take care of the rest.”

Their oasis had dried up.

The adventurers fell tearfully to their knees.

“Whyyy

The Jack in the Box was not at all to blame for their complaints, but the two idiots continued preparing for battle based on a misguided fighting spirit.

And one of them shouted into his radio.

“Quenser to all. This isn’t how we planned it, but I’m about to spread the adhesive!! Pay attention to the wind direction and wear your masks even if you aren’t in the designated area! This might get your hair all dried-out, so run away if you care about your roots! Here we go!!”

“Ah!? …H-huh? I feel like I was just having the most wonderful dream. Why can’t I stop crying…?”

After twisting the hose nozzles attached to the drums and powering on the giant fans, Quenser left the area with the boy who had made a miraculous return.

The Baby Magnum and the Jack in the Box were moving back and forth with MMA-like footwork, which made it extremely difficult to predict their paths, but that did not mean it was completely impossible.

Yes, the Jack in the Box would drive a thick stake into the ground with its tail-like unit to make quick dashes faster than its static electricity system would allow.

(For one thing, it shouldn’t get much of a repulsive force from driving that stake into fragile ground. This wasteland is especially fragile, so it should want to avoid anywhere with large cracks.)

Whether it was offensively messing with the enemy Object or defensively making an emergency evasion, the Jack in the Box’s quick dashes were indispensable. If it failed just once there, it would grind to a halt, greatly increasing the threat of an attack from the Princess.

And while an Object was a collection of military secrets, the fragility of the ground below its feet could be judged by the naked eye.

All they had to do was keep an eye on the Jack in the Box’s movement sand surreptitiously spread the adhesive spray along the tougher areas it was likely to travel through.

The Object used a static electricity system.

If they could clog up the repellant sprayers, they could keep the Faith Organization from moving. It did not have to be permanent. Even a few seconds would be enough.

Quenser held his radio to his mouth.

“I’m beginning distribution of the epoxy resin. The more solid areas the Jack in the Box prefers are marked on your map, right? Don’t go there and get yourself destroyed, okay!?”

“Just give me the signal.”

“Prepare a laser beam secondary cannon. If it moves to anywhere from D4 to F2, fire at its feet! The heat-hardening adhesive will react and clog up its repellant sprayers!!”

“Wait! Hold on, Quens-…”

Heivia seemed to realize something and quickly tried to stop him, but Quenser had already given the signal.

The two idiots’ visions were filled with a flash hundreds of times brighter than welding light.

The laser beam itself could not be seen.

But when it scorched the ground, the secondary light and noise pushed up at them from below.

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

Quenser held his eyes and writhed in pain. He could tell someone else was screaming nearby, but he never would have imagined it was Heivia trying to grab his collar, failing, throwing out his fist in frustration, and happening to hit a giant cactus.

(Damn. But that had to have worked! If the adhesive below the Jack in the Box reacted, then…!!)

He may have been lucky the laser beam had been a secondary cannon and not a main one. Quenser did not have to worry about going blind and his vision started to return after he rubbed his eyes for a few seconds. His vision was blurry, like it was covered in tears, but he could just barely make out the image.

(What happened to the Jack in the Box? Did the Princess manage to finish it off…???)

He was not even 200 meters away from the monster.

Since it could no longer spread its repellant, it must have lost the ability to keep its 200,000 ton mass afloat with static electricity. The Jack in the Box dug up a giant cloud of sand as its floats scraped at the ground and it was desperately trying to recover its balance after pitching forward. The tail that could freely move along the rear 180 degrees was sliding back and forth. It almost looked like a person on the edge of a building rooftop swinging their arms and legs around to regain their center of gravity.

Quenser knew it was working.

They had succeeded.

The Jack in the Box had been stopped. If the Princess fired one of her main cannons now, she could blast right through the spherical main body. This would end it. The Baby Magnum circled around the enemy Object, moved its seven arms, and prepared to fire low-stability plasma cannons to end this.

A moment later, the Jack in the Box stabbed its tail into the ground and leaped to the side.

It weighed as much as two old-fashioned nuclear aircraft carriers. But despite weighing more than 200,000 tons, it nimbly evaded.

It slipped through the gaps in the seven bluish-white lines of the Princess's low-stability plasma cannons.

Quenser, Heivia, and even the nearby cactuses and the destroyed military truck were lifted from the ground. It was almost like the entire ground had become a trampoline, but the forces were simply too great. Around the point the tail had struck, incredible cracks ran out like a window pierced by the tip of an umbrella.

After falling back to the ground, Quenser was nearly crushed by the rolling truck, but he did not have time to scream about something so trivial.

After skillfully dodging, where exactly had the Jack in the Box flown?

It was coming.

It was coming here!?

"Oh, no!! Heivia, run away!! We'll be caught in the middle!!"

"When the hell did you learn the Island Nation's sexy kunoichi replacement techni-…wahhh!? What the hell is that, goddammit!?"

If that 200,000-ton mass reached them, they would be turned to mincemeat. The two idiots must have thought that being on the ground was too dangerous or that they had to avoid becoming bowling pins when someone threw a strike. They climbed up onto the rolled-over truck and then tried to climb onto the dried brick-colored rocks it was leaning against.

There was no way they could have made it up in time.

By the time they got on the truck, the Jack in the Box arrived.

"…!!"

"…!?"

Either they did not have time to scream or they were screaming until their throats tore but their brains forgot to process the sound.

One of the Jack in the Box's four floats sent the truck flying and knocked down the rocks they had been trying to climb onto. After just barely scrambling onto the truck, the two idiots were left in the air like the Island Nation Daruma Otoshi game. The truck vanished from below them, they swam through the air with an odd sensation of floating, and then they fell straight back down.

"Agwosh!?"

An indecipherable word left Quenser's mouth and he finally realized his circumstances here.

He was on top of it.

He had ended up right on top of one of the static electricity floats!?

"Heiv-…he's not here!? Did that bastard manage to escape danger all on his own!?"

Failing that game of Daruma Otoshi meant he might have been turned to mincemeat below the float, but the thought did not seem to occur to Quenser. In a variation on a bizarre weather event where frogs rained from the sky, various parts of the truck fell all around: screws, bolts, destroyed tires, bent wheels, etc. Meanwhile, the Jack in the Box began to swing its tail around with a creaking noise.

(What!? Is it going to keep fighting using its pile bunker tail dashes!?)

It was time to make a decision.

Would he remain on the float and be thrown high in the sky, or would he jump down and be crushed by the explosive winds produced by that 200,000 ton mass. After thinking about it, that idiot who probably had an erection year-round definitely felt his balls shriveling up. He was going to die. No matter what he did, there was no saving him!!

“Gyahh! Gyahh!!
Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

And an indecisive guy always met the same fate: time up.

The Jack in the Box fired its giant stake into the ground once more and leaped toward the other side with flustered Quenser still onboard.

But he did not suddenly lose his footing and fly into the sky like a human homerun.

Something dug painfully into his right hand.

He hesitantly opened his eyes to check and saw a metal wire a thick as his little finger tangled around his hand.

It was a piece of the simple winch attached to the front of Myonri’s abandoned truck. The other end of the wire was apparently tangled around one of the many secondary cannons sticking out of the spherical main body like an urchin or chestnut burr.

I’m saved, he thought, just before another thought came to mind.

(Huh? If it lands like this and all the force is concentrated on that single point, won’t it just sever my right hand? Y’know, like slicing through a boiled egg with piano wire.)

“E-ee-eeeeeek!?”

He only had a few seconds until they landed. He did not know what his options were, so he simply swung his left hand over and grabbed at the wire.

The basic idea was the same as a parachute harness. By distributing the force over his entire body, the impact on any one point would be reduced.

He forcibly wrapped it around his torso as the asteroid fell toward the dried brick-colored wasteland.

“Bwohhh!!!???”

His ribs creaked and he choked at the strange sensation of pressure on his internal organs. He seriously may have broken some bones, but his right hand was intact. It had not been severed.

He understood just how disgusting he was with a strange sweat covering his face and back, but then he realized something.

He was somewhere else than before.

The Jack in the Box had swung him from the long, long winch wire like a pendulum, the wire had gotten tangled around another secondary cannon on the spherical main body, and he was now dangling down from that.

Was that really just a coincidence?

No, the Jack in the Box was not a natural phenomenon. Since it was moving around based on the Elite’s decisions, he could control those movements by interfering with the basis behind those decisions.

Which meant…

“Princess! Keep an eye on your location and have the Jack in the Box move in a zigzag!! I’ll try to climb up to the top using this pendulum motion!!”

“I’m pretty sure that would get you killed.”

“I’d be in even more danger if the Jack in the Box moved around less predictably! Please do this before my belly is crushed like an empty milk carton!!”

This was a lot like assisted suicide.

The Princess followed Quenser’s instructions as she moved around and maintained a lock so the Jack in the Box would counterattack with tail dashes to the left and right. With each dash, the idiot dangling from the wire was thrown around on his midair swing. His path sometimes drew out a downward-facing fan shape and other times he gained enough momentum to make a full circle. Like he was tangling a string around the nails in a pachinko machine, Quenser got the wire caught on more and more secondary cannons as he made his way higher and higher.

“I think it will notice the wire when there’s an error in the secondary cannons’ movement,” said the Princess. “It might conclude it’s just a problem caused by the adhesive, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“Urp. The Jack in the Box is screwed if its movement is taken from it. Even if it receives an error message, will it really have time to worry about anything other than the main cannon which can defeat you? Gwehhh…”

“What are you even hoping to accomplish by getting on top of it?”

“Exactly what we initially planned,” said Quenser while he finally clung to the top of the spherical main body. “Take out that goddamn main cannon.”

Part 11

Now that he was at his destination, he no longer needed the wire. In fact, letting it swing him around any longer would take him elsewhere.

The part wrapped around his torso was not so bad, but the part digging into his right hand was a problem. Once he concluded he could not get it off in a hurry, he pulled out a pen-like electric fuse and taped it to the finger-thick wire.

He detonated it without attaching an explosive.

“!!”

There was a bursting sound several times louder than a firecracker and Quenser looked away. But he had managed to burn through the wire and free his hand. He pulled it off of the hand and retied the part on his torso to his backpack’s shoulder straps. Just like a parachute, he could avoid the previous pain as long as the weight was distributed appropriately.

“Quenser, it’s about to move.”

“Hahh!!”

He wrapped the excess wire around a nearby secondary cannon.

Even if it was secondary, it was still more than a meter thick, making it the same as a small, centuries-old tree.

He just barely finished his preparations before the Jack in the Box jumped again. He clenched his teeth as he felt a strange floating sensation and prepared for the drop.

Immediately after the force that launched him upwards, his body was floating freely.

The idiot thought the wire's knot may have come undone, but that was not the case. The entire loop of wire had risen up and come off the end of the secondary cannon.

"…Ahh…"

He did not have time for sorrow.

With his support gone, the small human flew more than 50 meters from the ground like a fallen leaf in the wind. If he fell to the ground, he would die on impact. No amount of flailing his arms and legs would help.

But he came to a stop once more.

The Object had more than 100 cannons covering its surface like a sea urchin or chestnut burr. After being thrown through the air, Quenser's loop of wire had caught on another cannon.

(I-I can't expect that to happen again…)

In a weird stroke of luck, he had been thrown of the front of the Object.

He was right in front of the Jack in the Box's face.

The main cannon had a silhouette similar to a collapsible parabolic antenna or an auto-open umbrella. The main pillar stuck straight forward and eight jointed arms blossomed out from that like flower petals. Each arm was equipped with the kind of powerful spring used in the earthquake-proofing to support an incredibly tall building that weighed between several hundred to several thousand tons. All eight concentrated their power on the central pillar to fire the lead shell that was shaped like a baumkuchen.

The springs themselves were exposed.

The giant springs could be seen as thick pieces of wrapped metal connecting the two ends of the arms which were bent in a V-shape. When they were extended, the springs would be positioned right alongside the arms.

But why were they exposed like that?

Every part of an Object's design had a purpose, so there had to be something there.

“The size is different, but the springs themselves are normal coil springs. Are they just chromium steel without any kind of trickery? …But wait. Normal chromium steel…???”

“Quenser, it’s about to jump again.”

“…!!!???”

As soon as he received the warning, Quenser leaned his body weight backwards while still supported by the wire. Just as he managed to fix the wire in place by getting it caught in the indentation of the swiveling pedestal at the base of the secondary cannon, the Jack in the Box made a great leap.

He was in a good position now. This would all be for naught if the loop came off and he was either moved to another secondary cannon or slammed to the ground.

While feeling an odd floating sensation, Quenser turned his head to view the main cannon that looked like a metal bridge from this close up.

“I was right. This is weird. If they were just using the hexavalent chromium to make steel springs, this system wouldn’t work!!”

“Quenser?”

He felt the impact of landing.

One of his backpack’s shoulder straps tore and he was just about tossed out into empty air. This was his only opportunity to act, so he had to make it count.

“No matter how much force they build up, they’re still made from normal chromium steel. So when they release their own power, the springs should grow red hot from the excess energy!!”

Recoil was also a type of force. With the space elevators seen in SF movies that dangled a single vertical wire down from space, having that taut wire snap would release such an immense amount of energy that it produced an explosion rivalling a nuclear weapon.

The same was true of the springs and steel panels containing energy on the level of an Object’s main cannon.

And if the springs were nothing more than metal…

“If they’re constantly exposed to the immense heat they create themselves, the

springs wouldn't last. They should lose their elasticity and stop working pretty quick. The Jack in the Box has to have a countermeasure for that. Does it cool them with liquid nitrogen? No, repeatedly heating and cooling them would only wear out the metal faster. So it isn't that. In fact, it would be weird if they were reliant on a single system."

"Get to the point."

"They're swapping out the springs. Frequently, and on the battlefield! The earthquake-proofing of high-rise buildings doesn't support the entire building with a single spring. This would be why they're having the people of the silo cities make so many springs. They make sure they always have extras and its designed so the other springs support it while each one is being replaced!!"

The Jack in the Box jumped again.

No, that was not it. It had released the springs of the eight arms arranged like a parabolic antenna, combined the vectors to direct them all straight forward, and launched an incredibly powerful lead shell.

He did not have time to follow along and see if the Princess had managed to dodge.

He was thrown through the air from an impact on the level of being hit by a light car from behind. He could not control where he flew. And as his arms and legs flailed meaninglessly through the air, he saw the Jack in the Box actually use its tail pile bunker to jump this time.

"…!!!???"

There was of course no way for him to dodge.

His inertia cancelled out some of the force, but it was still a 200,000-ton mass. It was a bit like being swatted by a giant wall.

He could not breathe.

Something entirely different from spit rose from deep in his throat and clogged his windpipe. Even so, he desperately worked to grasp his situation as he lay sprawled out on some kind of surface.

Not only was he flattened against the flying Jack in the Box almost like a squashed frog, but he was on the main cannon's central pillar now that the arms had folded up like a closed umbrella after firing. The eight arms had folded up alongside the main pillar and he was caught inside one of the grooves that looked a lot like gear

teeth or Island Nation *naruto* before it had been sliced. That was why he had not fallen. His back was stuck to the side of the main cannon while ignoring the common idea that gravity should be directed downward.

He could hear some kind of creaking or straining sound.

He initially thought it was his spine or ribs, but bones did not sound that metallic.

(The main cannon has a repair factory in the center.)

To repeat, the Jack in the Box's main cannon used giant springs and it was structured a lot like the frame of an auto-open umbrella. When aimed, it would open up like a crossbow. When fired, it would close up along the main pillar.

And when closed, the center was not visible from the outside.

During that time, the inner side of the extended arms was positioned right alongside the main pillar. While the two points were in contact, what if metal shutters opened and replaced the heat-weakened springs with new ones?

(…We don't have to destroy the whole thing…)

He pulled all the Hand Axe he had from his backpack. It was 10 kilograms in all. But attaching a fuse and detonating it would not even scratch a nuke-resistant Object.

That was not his intent.

He desperately used his arm strength alone to knead the clay-like Hand Axe and stuck it to the side of a folded arm while doing his best to remain conscious.

(Even the largest clock tower's gears will stop moving if a small pebble gets inside. A warship's rapid-fire gun can malfunction from soot or dust. That shutter opens up, produces a new spring, swaps them out, and closes once more. If I can keep any one step from working…)

The cross section of the main pillar and eight arms looked a lot like a gear, so he shoved the clump of clay into the gap between the main pillar and an arm.

He did not have a specialized spatula, so he used his hands over and over again.

He did not have time to include a fuse.

It was no more than clay like that, but he did not have time to worry about that.

After a few seconds of hang time, the Jack in the Box landed.

Finally, Quenser flew through the air with nothing at all to support him.

He had no plan for how to survive this.

He might die here. He was more than 20 meters up. Those facts blankly filled his mind as he meaninglessly flailed his limbs around during the awfully long hang time.

A tremendous impact struck his entire body.

He thought he had fallen face-first into concrete.

“Gh, bgh…!!!???”

The impact of falling caused his body to sink even further. Something slimy pressed in at him from all directions. He could not process the oddly damp sensation and he started to panic, but then he realized what it was: water.

He had been thrown from the Object and into a river running across the dry land.

“Cough!! Ubwah, bwah!?”

(Damn, it’d be a tragedy if a guy this good looking broke his nose!)

He was fortunate the water was too deep for him to stand in.

The fundamental fear of drowning gripped his heart as he struggled at the water’s surface.

The Jack in the Box was still alive.

“Quenser, if you failed, just say so,” said the Princess. “We need to come up with a new plan. The Jack in the Box is approaching the silo city while crashing into the ground, so the entire geofront might cave in.”

“No…just watch.”

After grabbing onto some rocks rising from the center of the river, Quenser gasped for breath and spoke.

“Everything’s all set up.”

That was when the Jack in the Box stopped moving.

This was not due to the tail-like pile bunker.

It was due to the main cannon that folded and unfolded like a collapsible parabolic antenna or an auto-open umbrella.

The enemy Object probably did not understand what had happened. It kept doing the same thing, but the main cannon would not cooperate, just like someone repeatedly pulling the trigger after their handgun jammed.

It did not matter if the cannon had actually been destroyed or not.

The shutters moved along rails.

So just like a train being derailed by a pebble on the track, the slightest foreign object could throw the whole thing off.

“Its main cannon has two modes: a firing mode and a spring replacement mode. But the two modes are mutually exclusive. So if you interfere with the process and prevent it from switching between modes, the Jack in the Box can no longer switch its main cannon to firing mode.”

“What did you do?”

“The shutters are a series of connected panels running along rails. The structure is the same for a 200,000-ton mass as it is for a small shop downtown. Shove some clay into the gaps in the rail, and it won’t be able to move.”

No fuse had been necessary.

The ten kilograms of clay he had kneaded together with all his arm strength had been enough.

“Your static electricity propulsion system and the elastic metal shell cannon using your prized springs have both been taken out. If you’re willing to keep up the fight with only the tail pile bunker, then I will praise you for having guts.”

Quenser snapped his fingers.

“Now say it, Princess. Tell them this is their last chance to send the white flag signal. Because this is checkmate.”

Part 12

He was a complete mess.

If the cute medic nurses had not personally rescued him in a rubber boat, he really might have been swept away by the river and become a deserter.

“My…my head won’t turn that way…”

“Oh, dear. You really took a beating.”

“Please let me rest my head in your lap.”

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear.

Quenser was recharging while being pampered by the kind and gentle girls, but that happy time would not last forever.

“Oh, we’ve finally made it back to base.”

“So which doctor am I getting? The high-pressure glasses woman in a white coat, a sweater, a tight skirt, a garter belt, black stockings, and high heels? Or the wrinkled old man? Today, I think I can aim for the jackpot… The goddess has to be smiling on me now!!”

The comparative lengths of the descriptions showed which one he was hoping for, but neither doctor showed up.

Having brought the base’s vehicles to the edge of the cliff, Major Frolaytia Capistrano spoke cheerfully to him.

“Quenser, I’m glad to see you’re alive. The emergency is over and things are back to normal, so get back in there and fix the electronic simulation division’s toys.”

“That hellish work is my final battle? Have you entirely forgotten what human rights are!?”

No matter what terrible things were being said to him, sitting up on reflex had been a mistake. That revealed just how uninjured he was, so Frolaytia winked.

“I honestly didn’t think you would fall for that one.”

“Eh? Oh, uh…”

“If you really couldn’t even sit up, I was planning to send you to the medical room, but if you can move, I have no choice. In a military society, we all work for pay taken out of the people’s taxes, so no one gets to eat for free, right?”

“You demon!! If you really want to play the demon, then grow horns, a tail, and wings and then wear a bondage miniskirt outfit for a proper Halloween special!!”

The medic nurses must have had no interest in a healthy boy because they returned to the wasteland in search of any injured in need of assistance.

That signaled the end of a temporary harem that was only kind to you while you had a cold.

“Come to think of it, what happened to Heivia? He’d better not be having a better time than me.”

“What, he wasn’t with you? Well, he’s about as tough as a cockroach, so I’m sure he’s crawling around here somewhere. I will have to dock his pay for being late to regroup with us, though.”

It really was the worst work environment.

All you good kids out there? Don’t have any sweet dreams about the military!!

“What about the silo city?”

“Since it’s a blank zone, we can’t interfere there.”

“Even though you essentially placed a donation box next to a convenience store register to encourage someone to take some independent action there?”

“Ahem.”

Frolaytia blatantly cleared her throat when the topic seemed to be turning toward her pain-in-the-rear brother. Anyone who could not “take a hint” here would never survive in the military hierarchy.

Quenser tested out the movement of his neck as he stepped out of the rubber boat.

He glanced in a different direction to view the silo city.

“Damn. When will I finally be able to take it easy?”

“As long as you’re working for someone else, never. Now, it’s time for that work you love so much.”

Part 13

In the silo city named Giant Pizza, the people were hesitantly showing up on the surface.

“What, what? It looks like the commotion has died down.”

“I’m scared… Are you sure this isn’t the lead in to something else?”

“Don’t push, don’t push! Oh, hell!!”

The explosions and tremors were frightening, but it was also nerve-racking to have them suddenly stop. The air was filled with an anxious tension combined with a strange attraction, like some invisible force was pushing them onward. It was a lot like searching your own name online even though you were afraid what you would find.

But a voice cleared away that atmosphere.

It belonged to a completely ordinary sort of fat sheriff.

“Don’t worry.” Thomas Goldenclipper squeezed the ring hanging from his neck and spoke his honest thoughts. “I will find out what the current situation is. Who cares if they’re the military!? This is our silo city! I will make sure all four world powers treat us the same. So don’t worry!!”

The wave of tension crashed against a breakwater.

It was over.

Even if he had no real power, the sheriff’s words contained something that had calmed the people.

A few people walked past him.

“…It would seem they managed somehow or other.”

One of them was Bloodrics Capistrano, a young man with a katana who wore a black tailcoat even in this scorching wasteland.

He was surrounded by several bodyguards and he had complete control over thousands of troops, putting them on the same level as a maintenance battalion. He was accompanied by the charity site management triplets who wore red tank

tops and miniskirts that made them look like cheerleaders. They stared out of the city, but the apocalyptic roar of main cannons had come to an end.

The triplets pressed their soft-looking cheeks together and viewed a small mobile device while looking as delighted as someone whose social network account was being followed by a celebrity.

“Looks like it’s over.”

“See, look. This is the footage from the drone.”

“The signal management is so lax in blank zones, isn’t it? In proper battlefield countries, civilian signals tend to be jammed☆”

Just as Bloodrics tried to get a look, the footage cut out.

The Legitimacy Kingdom may have been irritated with the civilian interference and shot it down with a handmade slingshot.

The silver-haired young man sighed.

“The Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance will probably send out investigation teams to preserve their management of the Greater Canyon. Then this will be more of a political struggle than a war. Cameras from all over the world will be here, so you should make sure you get word out to people’s living rooms about your opportunities to help people.”

“Of course.”

“I will be returning to Paris for now. If a noble was injured in this racial salad bowl, who knows who would get blamed. I would prefer not to provide the spark that triggers a war between the four world powers.”

“Understood. Continue supporting us online, okay?☆”

After casually waving goodbye, the triplets exchanged a glance.

And then they spoke to each other.

“…So how’d it go?”

“Hmm, below average, I’d say.”

“Ehhh? That it wasn’t an outright failure makes that a really annoying result.”

Perhaps because they had been released from the fear and tension, restless high spirits filled the silo city and the triplets followed the flow of the crowds as they walked through it.

“Then again, wasn’t it a positive that the Faith Organization’s intentions didn’t get through to the Legitimacy Kingdom?”

“If your gold egg doesn’t hatch, it’s meaningless.”

“Waiting for the truth of the hexavalent chromium to be revealed and become a ‘legend’ might have made for some good sample data, though.”

Who was Rica, which one was Alisa, and what triplet was Orsia? That was not all that important. The triplets did not care as long as their thoughts formed a single opinion that led to the correct answer.

“The souls of the noble sacrifices reside in the main cannon. By monitoring the process by which that was logically disproven, we could have learned how to break down a ‘legend’ using data.”

“If we could create that kind of anti-legend flowchart, we wouldn’t have to rely on the persuasiveness of people’s words any longer. Just like online customer support contacts are handled by AI these days, we could complete a religion-destroying program that automatically searches out and points to the contradictions in any myth or legend.”

“Still, religion sure is scary. If secrets of this magnitude are leaking out, just how far have they infiltrated our military?”

The triplets giggled.

Even with so many people around them, they managed to blend into the background and prevent anyone from paying attention to them.

“Yes, it was the Faith Organization that worked its way into our safe countries while disguising it as junk mail from foreign companies. And it was all paid for by that damn old man who thinks he’s some kind of saint. They even made sure to avoid any landmine terms that would be caught by checks on foreign phone calls and mail.”

“We’re supposed to be the ones who use data as a weapon, so this was like suddenly finding a stealth bomber flying overhead.”

“So if we want to strike back, it has to use data, doesn’t it?”

The result was exactly as they had said: below average.

They could use the human mind to find and point to contradictions, but that had been done at ecumenical councils since more than a millennium ago. They wanted to go a step further. Their idea of "victory" was a lot like the anti-air laser systems that automatically shot down all aircraft: a convenient service that would fill in all the holes on its own.

They wanted a social structure that would deny all religions as easily as a readily-downloadable cellphone translation app. You would not need to be a rhetorical genius. They would spread a system that allowed anyone to tear down what had been built up for a millennium just by holding up their mobile device.

That would mean an age of despair for the Faith Organization.

That was why the Venerable Elder would want to destroy the silo city testing ground while he smirked at them from the other side of that thin tent. That was why he would be willing to use the brute force of an Object to do so.

"We don't know how far it has spread, so should we head underground for the time being?"

"Yes. There aren't many people we can truly trust."

"And we certainly can't tell them that's exactly what makes them so valuable☆"

The girls turned a corner as they discussed the issue.

A nervous-looking young man was standing there and his face lit up when he saw them.

"C-c'mon, let's get out of here. If word gets out that three officers – from the Martini Series no less – are trespassing in the Greater Canyon, it'll turn into a war between the two main countries!"

"Sure thing."

"Okay, driver. Then get our pumpkin carriage ready☆"

"I want seafood for dinner. I'm sick of all the red meat they eat here."

The corners of the selfish girls' eyes softened as they spoke.

That young man probably did not realize how important he was as someone they could approach without putting on any kind of act.

Alisa Martini Sweet.

Rica Martini Medium.

Orsia Martini Dry.

Those genius girls who had been created by the Information Alliance giggled as

they vanished into the underside of history.

The three sisters had moved all their pawns around perfectly, but they had made one miscalculation.

A grim reaper in black stood before them.

“#49?”

“Call me the Stopgap Grim Reaper. The adults gave me my name and number, so I’m not too fond of them.”

The blonde girl was accompanied by a young man who was not the three sisters’ type.

She took a step toward those three sisters.

“You were aware of everything from the beginning, weren’t you?”

“…”

“The Faith Organization was running those temporary factories by failing to explain the risk of hexavalent chromium and driving the workers to death. You knew, but you let it happen and even watched it play out. …Was that because they weren’t Information Alliance citizens? Or would you be able to do the same to your own people?”

“Calm down, little girl. We were acting on orders from above, so you can’t exactly blame this on our own-…”

“Do you know where the pair to the sheriff’s ring is?”

The girl cut them off with ice in her eyes.

And she repeated herself.

“Do you know where it is buried in this vast wasteland?”

No one could say a word.

It did not matter who those triplets were, even if they were unmanageable geniuses who could break out of a max-security prison barehanded. The look in the girl’s eyes silenced them.

A light glistened. From a military perspective, this was an entirely meaningless

result. The blond girl's black uniform was caked with dried sand and she held a cheap ring in her hand.

"It's a shame this wasn't an issue you should have troubleshot yourselves. If it was, I could have had you shot right here and now. The fact that you actually did the 'proper' thing here just makes the world look so very cruel."

She took another step.

Her small hand tightened around that ring which – cheap though it was – held someone's feelings for someone else. She was now close enough to fatally stab them if she had a blade and Wraith Martini Vermouthspray spoke quietly to them.

She only gave them one peaceful warning.

But it contained the implication that, if they did this again, she would mercilessly make good on her words.

"You spoiled brats might think yourselves intellectuals, but could you say the same thing if you were poisoned down to the marrow and buried in a hole?"

Between the Lines 2

The silver-haired and brown-skinned female officer named Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito had arrived in Central Park while moving from cover to cover with a handheld, ultra-high resolution CCD camera.

She was disguised with glasses and a lawyer suit instead of her usual military uniform because her target was the top idol girl who was also the Pilot Elite at the core of her unit.

The girl wore cyclewear that included skintight bike shorts and she was riding a bicycle that was a little large because it was rented with a prepaid card. While she took a break by resting one foot on the ground, her disguised commander was completely locked onto her.

"(Kyaaahh☆ No matter what she says, that kitty's body craves the greenery of nature! I just love how she insisted she wanted to go to New York, but she's already gotten sick of the crowds. Oh, and she's so defenseless! Her armpits are

wide open!! Ah, ah, ah, no! Don't stick that extra-thick hot dog in your mouth right here in the public park! That's too much!! Too wonderfully much!!)"

"Lieutenant Colonel, you have moved too far forward. We can monitor the target with drones and satellites."

"(Shut up. Ruin this moment and I swear I will kill you. How can we rely on a soulless machine to capture the courageous image of that girl pretending to be calm but still arriving 20 minutes early to meet her parents for food!? Besides, footage from overhead would only show the top of her head, which would be entirely pointless! Are you trying to tell her fortune from her hair whorl, operator!? Hm? But isn't that extra-thick thing a bit much before such an important meal? Oh, she just couldn't resist the delicious aroma, could she!? She's just so cute I can't stand it!! Kyah, kyah, kyah!!)"

"Lieutenant Colonel, I have to compliment you on your ability to blend so perfectly into the background despite acting so bizarrely. Do those rumors of a ninja unit have anything to do with you?"

With its green grass and bountiful fruit trees, Central Park was an area of preserved nature measuring more than 4 kilometers from north to south in Manhattan, which was the center of New York. But no matter how much greenery it had and even though it contained a zoo, an art museum, an outdoor theatre, and other facilities, it was still basically a public park. It provided little cover and was only slightly better than a golf course on that front. That made it a challenge for the bodyguards who either wore suits and neckties or who wore sportswear while carrying yoga mats, but Lendy had moved in closer than any of them. A lot of the professionals clicked their tongues at being on a mission and thus unable to look down at their notes while seeing such incredible skill displayed before their eyes.

Lendy knew everything about their target and their target could not see her.

The woman was a concentrated form of the Information Alliance's structure of influence.

"Lieutenant Colonel, we have a warning from Martini Extradry who is in charge of Manhattan security."

Lendy did not seem to care a she snacked on some freid gyoza in a paper container she had bought from a popular junk Chinese food truck.

"I don't like them. They're like mass-produced products with no life in their eyes. They're not cute like an Elite."

“The flow of data shows an unknown approaching our target. I suspect it is a recruiter for an entertainment agency. He seems to be using a cheap pickup technique where he creates an opening for a conversation by sending several unlisted phone calls to her smartphone and bumping into her when she checks her phone.”

“Now that is the kind of report I need to hear. I will kill him. That Martini is a good Martini. Tell her our battalion will do her one favor on the battlefield. As long as it does not sully that girl’s hands.”

“Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Not to worry. I really will kill him.”

“No, my worries are in the exact opposite direction. You are in charge here, so please come back to your senses.”

The media criticized people who looked at their smartphone while walking as much as people who smoked on the roadside, so the way people faked accidents had changed. Anyone would prefer to bump into a soft girl instead of risking their life running out in front of a high-speed deadly weapon. Unlike with bicycles or cars, contact between people did not require intervention from an insurance company, so it was a lot easier to have a one-on-one conversation and various demands could be made in secret.

Had this man thought an amateur pickup artist’s trick would work in the realm of fierce professionals?

Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito was in charge of more than just the formal military. As a staff officer from the Vital Wartime Public Relations Strategy Room, she was involved in the overall creation of a top idol, from the stage costumes to the added CG!!

…The fact that such ridiculous oppression was filed away as dull paperwork was a sign of just how far the Information Alliance’s privileged class would go in its drive to rule everything with data.

“Not only is he going to ruin the mood just as she is preparing to make some enjoyable memories with her parents, but he is going to set her up as the one at fault? He really is scum. This is my chance to change the very history of our military…”

“Are you seriously going beyond a simple crime and turning this into a revolution!?”

That dollhouse queen was already making international tours on her own, so if a competing agency made a pass at her, it could easily lead to a legal battle between giant corporations (if not an actual battle between Objects), but the culprit was probably ignorant of what he was walking into here. That was hardly surprising when the public image of the idol was only CG data created from the girl's motion data. She truly was a sinful little devil if she could draw in a pro recruiter with her unrecognizable real face as well. In the age of photo-editing, it was rare for an unmodified face to look like a goddess.

"Okay, time to get to work," said Lendy. "I can use this to improve her opinion of me even more."

"Lieutenant Colonel, this is a covert mission, so you can never brag about it to the target."

"…Oh, that sounds nice too. I really shine when I protect her smile from the shadows and demand nothing in return. Kyaaahh☆"

In a distant location, the young female operator failed to keep her stress at bay by sipping at a sweet and honey-filled chain store coffee and chowing down on a custom Island Nation-style bagel that had thin-sliced salmon and tofu paste inside. She finally switched off her expensive headset and screamed.

"Do you look at *everything* in a positive light, you idol-obsessed freak!?"

"…I heard that. Do not underestimate the Information Alliance's privileged class, little girl."

To repeat, she had switched off her headset.

It was like a supernatural phenomenon.

Lendy was probably also aware that the fear had loosened the young operator's bladder a little.

Chapter 3: Welcome to the End of a Stable World >> Defense of the Chesapeake District

Part 1

This was the worst.

The clean wars had never provided any particularly nice experiences for those two idiots, but this time it truly was the worst.

“Hey, Heivia, weren’t we working to bring love and peace to the world not long ago?”

“Don’t talk, you bastard. That’ll use up more of our oxygen.”

They were in a cramped living space no larger than two bathtubs stacked on top of each other.

The capsule-shaped device had thick anti-pressure armor, two thin arms with propellers on the end that could turn in any direction, a powerful light, and a round window.

It was a small submersible that looked like the product of a startup’s hard work. It seemed to show off how handmade it was, like it was meant to demonstrate how its production had breathed new life into a failing downtown factory, but it was surrounded by complete darkness. However, it was not currently nighttime. The hot sun shining on the Atlantic seemed to have forgotten that autumn had arrived, but the sunlight could not reach this depth.

They were more than 200 meters deep.

The water pressure at the depth was not enough to crush the human body like a punctured basketball, but it was too deep for free diving. It was undoubtedly a deadly region of sea.

To intentionally recover the ocean’s oxygen, thin wires had been laid out lengthwise and widthwise and seaweed had been planted along them. However,

that oxygen plant had been split apart by a giant mass of steel that had torn a line across the ocean floor.

In place of sunlight, pale ultraviolet lights revealed the identity of the dark mass: an 85m missile submarine.

Heivia grabbed the radio mic which was attached with something like a phone cord.

“Hey, hey, heyyy. We’re as short on time as you are and we’re only going to bother with humanitarian aid while we’re in a good mood. If you don’t want this to end in a fight over invisible oxygen, then obediently follow our instructions, Capitalist Corporations.”

“Unique Publishing to unidentified craft. The hit to our propeller shaft that ruptured our ballast tank was caused by a torn wire from your oxygen plant, Legitimacy Kingdom. That is a serious case of sea route disruption and a violation of international law. If we get back alive, we will see you in court.”

“Could you put someone else on the line? Overly-serious student council presidents and class reps only work when they’re girls. I think coming down here was a complete waste of time.”

“And do the Capitalist Corporations auction off the right to name their weapons? Y’know, like they do with sports stadiums?”

At any rate, they had to get to work.

There were a few different ways of rescuing people from a sunken submarine. For example, they could send out a small submersible, attach its hatch to the submarine’s, and ferry the crew to the surface bit by bit. However, that would take time and only worked if the submarine had plenty of oxygen to spare.

But there was another way:

“We’ll be going the balloon route on this one. After attaching a few nitrogen-deployment balloons across the submarine to secure some buoyancy, we will use several submersibles to pull it to the surface.”

“That could easily fail,” replied the submarine. “What if the submarine breaks in two on the way up!?”

“Trust in the sub you guys designed. We’re not as greedy as you in the Capitalist Corporations, but we aren’t stupid enough to rescue enemy soldiers for free. We’re building up experience by testing out an experimental method. Here we

go.”

With no motivation at all in his voice, Heivia watched as the various submersibles surrounded the submarine. After getting the submarine to float up, they had to do some work alongside it, but it was not actually supported by pillars. If it suddenly tilted, it would crush them underneath it, so they had to see just how stable it was first.

“We’re risking our lives here, so you’d better be thoughtful enough to greet us with a crew full of bikini babes.”

“Heivia, they can’t violate causality. We were sent out only after the sub sank. No matter how thoughtful they are, they couldn’t have selected the crew for our benefit.”

“We’ve got a teacher’s pet over here too!? How many times do I have to tell you only girls can get away with being that straight-laced!?”

If possible, they wanted to avoid being anywhere near that submarine and all the dangers it presented, but then they would have to ask themselves why they came down here in the first place. So Heivia kept in contact using the short-range radio while they hesitantly took wires attached to large spheres and directly welded the ends of the wires to the submarine’s exterior.

“What a strange sight. This isn’t going to cause a water vapor explosion, is it?”

“Wait,” protested the submarine.

“There’s a method to this. Offshore oil rigs are made of metal, so they’ve developed ways to weld underwater. Not that that’s our specialty or anything.”

“Can we please play a word game or something?” asked the submarine. “They play classical music even when you’re under general anesthetic for surgery, so being stuck here listening to your terrible conversations is going to make my heart burst!!”

This was not a life-risking group date with several girls, so they were not about to play a party game with a bunch of filthy guys. Instead, Heivia and the others moved on to the next stage of work.

Once they had successfully attached the balloons, the submersibles temporarily moved away. After they sent an electronic signal, the spheres of synthetic fiber ruptured from within.

They were balloons, but they were not like airbags.

The large deep-sea lights showed a translucent sludge covering everything.

The gel was lighter than water and detonating several balloons at once had coated the heavy submarine in the gel, giving it buoyancy.

Quenser commented on the unnatural haze floating in the ocean.

“It’s like seeing the aftermath of that one kid in the pool who couldn’t hold it in and betrayed everyone.”

“Please stop surrounding our submarine with your horrific imagination!”

However…

“Crap, some of us were too slow. #7 and #9, watch the portside tilt. Don’t get caught by that piece of junk!!”

“We really are going to sue you!!!!!”

“If you’re okay with telling the world how you got your own sub sunk and then had to get help from an enemy nation, then go right ahead! If it gets out that you sank the sub plastered with your sponsor’s name, won’t you have to pay damages!?”

The submarine just about rolled over, but with the eel-like slippery substance surrounding it, it began to float up instead.

The gap of a few centimeters below it was the beginning of a miracle.

Once it began to float, the submarine moved so easily it was hard to believe it had been stuck in place just a moment before. Now that it had buoyancy, it floated so lightly that a push from the hand was enough to move it in any direction.

“Let’s grab that thing and drag it up. I can’t believe everyone in there has such a stick up their butt.”

“Oh, you poor thing. Why are all you Legitimacy Kingdom boys so irritable? Try smiling every now and then☆”

“Please don’t force that falsetto! It’s creepy!! Why is it that hard workers tend to put all their effort into the wrong things!?”

The amount of oxygen in the submarine was a concern, but there was also a danger of the buoyancy-providing sludge coming off during the rapid ascent.

“How long is this going to take?” asked the submarine.

“Think of it like an elevator. 200 meters would be taller than a trendy hotel’s observation deck restaurant, wouldn’t it? That’s not a height you can travel in a flash.”

“Gather the best of the Capitalist Corporations and we could create a silent elevator that travels a 1000m building in a minute. And the ride would be so smooth that it would not rouse a sleeping baby.”

“Do you die if you don’t brag about something every five minutes!?”

The arguing continued during the careful twenty minute journey to the surface.

Eventually, the scene outside the round window changed.

The surrounding water remembered that sunlight existed. And they saw schools of small fish swimming ever downward as if afraid of something.

As their ascent continued, they could see some larger fish floating around. They were clearly not here of their own free will.

They felt a low rumbling.

It was clearly coming from above.

“Wh-what?” said the submarine. “What is going on???”

“It’s the same as landmine fishing. The fish hit by the shockwaves are knocked out. Honestly, they had even built an oxygen plant to help the bluefin tuna population recover, but that’s all ruined now that some idiot has come to this marine reserve. The conveyer belt sushi chains are going to get a lot of international criticism again.”

“So they’re gonna continue rubbing lard on random deep-sea fish to pretend its tuna, are they? That Island Nation-obsessed busty commander is not going to be happy…”

They had so longed to reach the surface, but they only found gloom as they approached it.

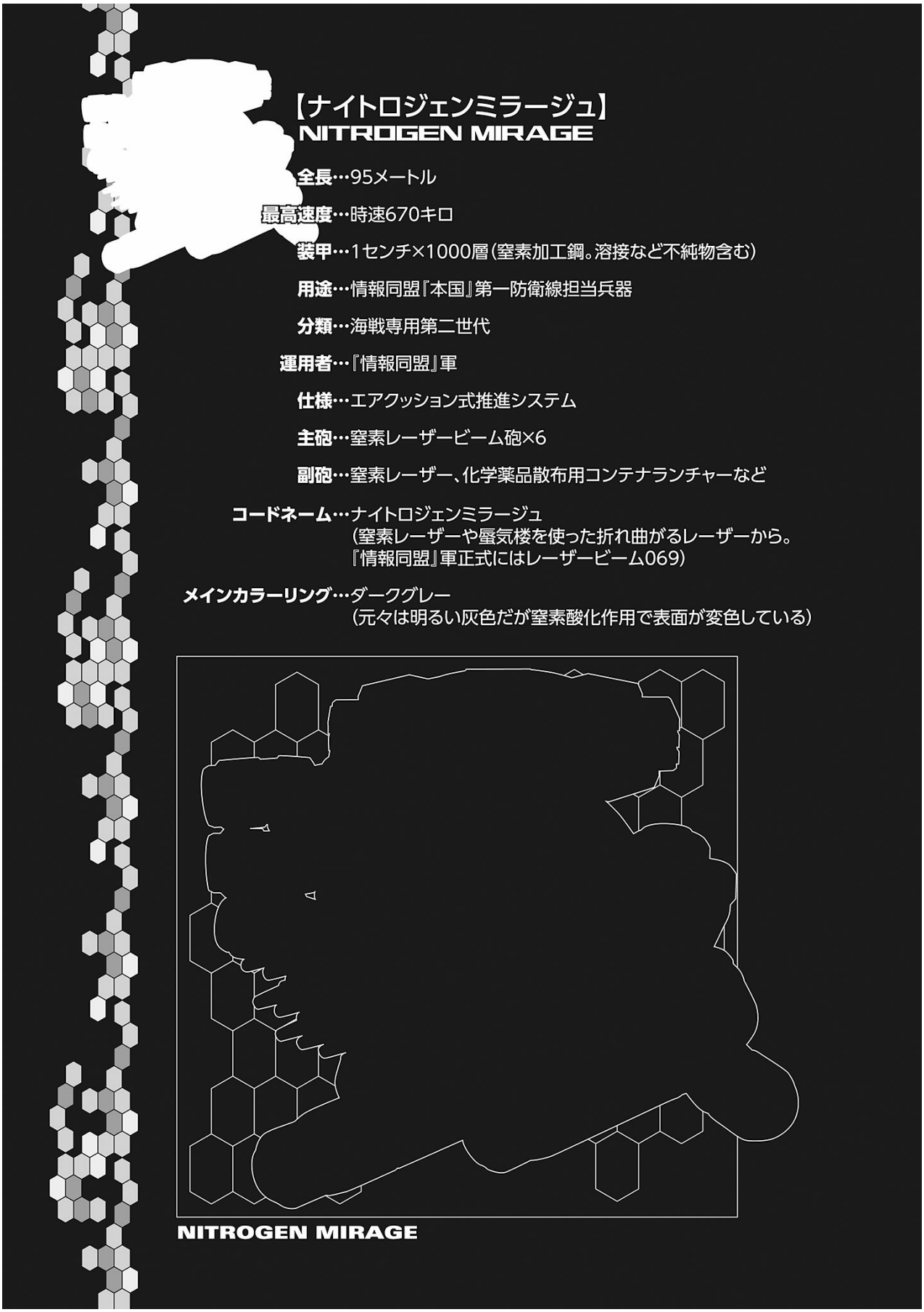
The submersible the size of two bathtubs broke the waves as it floated to the surface.

And they saw the two combatants.

The Baby Magnum and the Nitrogen Mirage.

Those Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance monsters were firing back and forth on this marine battlefield.

While the Princess switched out her seven main cannons to swap out shell type and moved all around on her attached naval floats, her opponent was a Second Generation Object with nitrogen laser main cannons and an aircushion propulsion device specialized for marine combat. It had three main cannons stacked vertically on either side. It seemed to fire the thick bluish-white beams in the wrong direction, but then they suddenly bent in various directions and accurately targeted the Baby Magnum.



“Ultraviolet nitrogen lasers… Those are hundreds of times more harmful than

sunlight, so don't they violate the treaties?"

"According to the electronic simulation division, the reactor is surrounded by several low-temperature conduction power generators that use liquid nitrogen. They use the reactor's excess energy to generate even more power to throw into the cannons. Either way, a direct hit will vaporize you, so the cancer risk is kind of irrelevant."

Laser beams were not visible to the naked eye, but they fried and reflected off of the dust and moisture in the air, which left something like an afterimage behind.

The thick ocean water had cut off the signals, so they found a lot of radio chatter once they arrived on the surface.

"Princess!! Update your meteorological data and reference the nitrogen and temperature distributions! That thing alternates between liquid nitrogen and a mixture of iron oxide and aluminum to create extreme temperature differences, those create mirages that disturb the ocean's surface, and that is used to bend the light!!"

"Understood, Frolaytia."

"Listen, Princess," added the old maintenance lady. "The light should change direction as if being drawn from the high temperatures to the low temperatures. Once you understand the rules, you can predict this mirage laser-bending trick."

Several clouds of white smoke expanded around the Nitrogen Mirage, but the sound was too soft for something meant to kill. It was reminiscent of the fireworks used to indicate the beginning of an athletic festival. There was a plate-like component raised above the spherical main body and container-shaped ejection devices were lined up along its edge. Most likely, they had exposed -195 degree liquid nitrogen to the outside temperature so that it would expand explosively.

Meanwhile, the Princess moved back and forth with MMA-like steps and accurately dodged all of the blue light dancing around her. To reiterate, what Quenser and the others could see was not the laser beams themselves. It was only the bluish-white afterimage left after the lasers passed through and fried the dust and moisture in the air.

The timeframe and world in which she fought was on an entirely different level.

This was a battle at light speed. By the time your senses could catch up, the attack would have already punched through you.

"…Wow. Is it just me or is the color fading from the Princess's armor?"

"The dense nitrogen and laser heat being scattered around the area is causing a chemical reaction in the onion armor's surface. It's called nitrogen iron oxide."

"What happens if we carelessly breathe in that colorless fog…?"

"Nitrogen itself isn't toxic, but it drives out the oxygen and creates a state of hypoxia. I don't know where the invisible minefield is, so we just have to be thankful we're inside an airtight submersible."

"The temperature difference is affecting our radio signals!" said Frolaytia. "The thermomagnetic effect is probably being used to produce an extreme electric potential difference in the air. Watch out for any adverse effects on your radar locks!!"

"But when I use visual confirmation, it looks like the thing is floating," said the Princess.

"Use the meteorological data to calculate back!" said the old maintenance lady. "It's only using mirages, so it can't create an image out of thin air! The giant plate-like meteorological radar on its head is proof of that!!"

Quenser could picture the troubled look on the Princess's face as she received that avalanche of instructions. Worst of all, they were doing it out of concern for her, so she could not ignore them either.

He also heard a voice of surprise from the sludge-covered submarine they were towing.

"H-how did this happen? You never said anything about this! We'll sue you for guiding us into danger like this!!"

"Is that your catchphrase or something!? If you like, we can always cut the wires and let you sink back to the bottom again!!"

"Why is the Information Alliance interfering in this…?"

"That's what we'd like to know." Quenser breathed an exasperated sigh before continuing. "What exactly are you carrying in that submarine?"

Part 2

Frolaytia Capistrano did not look happy.

The civilized convenience of air-conditioning removed the heat of Central and South America from the room while her laptop screen displayed a close up of someone she did not recall adding to her address book.

It was Wraith Martini Vermouthspray.

The small girl had long blonde hair and a distinctive black uniform.

“No need to worry. I am not here to discuss an international conflict today.”

“…”

“Or should I have explained this first? I am an Information Alliance citizen, but I am partitioned off from the standard military. After all, I am the troubleshooting specialist known as the Stopgap Grim Reaper. I thought I would give some advice to the swine that position demands I respect, but if you refuse to listen, I will end this call instead. Yes, I would like for you to take a certain action.”

Frolaytia grimaced and said nothing.

Just how many people on the planet could find that reaction to be undeniably delightful?

“Your time is up, but in a useful way. I will take that as acceptance since you did not reject the idea, Major Tortoise.”

“…You goddamn search engine.”

“I will treat anything other than a yes or a no as an invalid response.” Wraith giggled and spun a pen in her hand. “The problem is that submarine the Legitimacy Kingdom picked up. It belongs to the Capitalist Corporations, doesn’t it? As I am sure you know, its cargo will spark a new war.”

“I believe it was your Information Alliance that attacked us.”

“And that is why this call is such a delicate tightrope to walk. Didn’t I say I am partitioned off from the standard military?”

“What are you saying was on that sub?”

“It would be best if you saw for yourself. I could always tell you here, but I doubt you would listen to a word I said after you learned the truth.”

"?"

Here alone, Frolaytia wrinkled her brow in honest confusion.

Wraith sighed on the screen.

"You can interpret this however you like, but I will cast pearls of human words before swine here. …I am on your side for this one. No matter what the Information Alliance chooses to do."

She sounded oddly sincere.

Then something else happened on the screen. The butler-like young man standing behind the small girl bent over and whispered some kind of report into Wraith's ear.

"My apologies, Major. I too have some business to take care of. I know your battalion will take care of this one no matter what I say, so there is no need to say goodbye. Until we meet again on this seemingly vast but surprisingly small battlefield."

That was when something occurred to Frolaytia.

It was mostly just a hunch, but…

"…Where are you right now?"

"Did you think I was simply with an Information Alliance maintenance fleet? Didn't I already say I am partitioned off from the standard military? Yes, that makes the third time. Anyway, you surprisingly birdbrained commander, I will troubleshoot the problems presented to me in my own way. …And this time, I am on your side. Do not forget that, okay?"

Part 3

They were near the equator in the Atlantic Ocean.

The region of ocean was right between the Information Alliance home country in eastern North America and the Legitimacy Kingdom-controlled South American Amazon District.

The Baby Magnum and the Nitrogen Mirage had not concluded their battle, but a lull had begun when the Information Alliance temporarily withdrew. The Legitimacy Kingdom predicted they had only withdrawn because the submarine had arrived at a dock.

“Welcome to the artificial volcano base known as New Caribbean Island.”

The submarine was welcomed by the battalion’s busty Major Frolaytia Capistrano who was flanked by bodyguards, but one part of her greeting caught their attention.

The dock had been quickly dug out of the coast with construction equipment, but the coast was not a sandy beach or a rocky cliff. It was a rough ground made of black pebbles hardened together like crunchy chocolate. The surface readily crumbled away just from scraping the sole of your boot against it.

The ground looked like a failed attempt at pavement and like it would be incredibly painful if you tripped onto it, but it was actually volcanic rock.

After struggling to get out of the goop-covered submarine, the middle-aged man who seemed to be the captain gave a somewhat sulky-looking naval salute.

“Rigas Blackpassion, Navy Captain. Thank you very much for your uncompensated assistance.”

“Don’t screw with us, Capitalist Corporations. You greedy people know better than anyone that there’s no such thing as a free lunch. Do not forget until the day you die that we have an extremely useful diplomatic card to use against you. You have no hope of reaching admiral now, Captain.”

“W-we cannot permit you to have a base here!!”

“Oh, this is just a bluefin tuna breeding base. There is nothing military about it. You see, my foolish brother is as obsessed with the Island Nation as me and he is the most troublesome sort of charity giver.”

“You expect us to believe this is a civilian installation!? When it can maintain an Object!?”

“It took a lot of doing rigging it up like that. It was not designed that way to begin with.”

Now, what was an artificial volcano base?

The rules governing the sea said that the area within 200 nautical miles of a

country's territory could be claimed as that country's exclusive economic waters. However, that did not apply to manmade things such as megafloats and offshore oil rigs.

But here they had found a loophole.

"I don't like borrowing a phrase from the Faith Organization, but this was a heavenly blessing. Who would have thought an underwater volcano would erupt and create an entire new island at just the right time?"

"We are well aware the seismographs detected some unnatural shaking. You drilled into the ocean bedrock and filled the hole with explosives, didn't you!?"

"I'm not about to listen to any accusations made without definitive proof. Go speak with those lawyers you love so much in the Capitalist Corporations. I'm sure they're just as impotently frustrated as you."

…That was the explanation.

"(This whole island is a toy made by that Sir Bloodrics guy, right? And he did so as casually as tossing some change in the donation box next to a convenience store register. Nobles scare me.)"

"(That pretentious bastard apparently wants to bring back the bluefin tuna filleting shows. I bet he wants to be served by geisha girls instead of maids and experience the Eastern wonder known as *nyotaimori*.)"

The rules of the sea were based on where the land was, but what if a brand new island appeared in the middle of the ocean one day? If it was inside a country's territorial waters or EEZ, it would naturally redraw the lines. And whether they were honest about it or not, modern technology allowed them to trigger a volcanic eruption in a calculated way.

It was the same as how image-editing software had wiped away the fear of ghost photographs. The questions about the island were on the same level as noticing the number of legs did not match up on a group photo at school.

Unlike the Pacific, the Atlantic Ocean had relatively few islands, so this new technology could easily provide a naval transportation breakthrough along the arctic routes that were more accessible thanks to global warming.

Frolaytia continued speaking with a cruel smile.

"If you wish to lodge here, we will need your cooperation. Now, what do you have aboard that submarine? The marine resource of migratory fish is enjoyed evenly

by the entire world, so why has the Information Alliance abandoned their stable supply of tuna by sending in an Object?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"To repeat, we are merely borrowing a civilian bluefin tuna breeding base. I can of course withdraw our military forces from here. I would only need to apologize to my foolish brother. Naturally, we would be leaving your broken submarine and its crew here. I'm not sure why, but it seems the Nitrogen Mirage is very interested in getting at you. It should be obvious what will happen once our excellent protector leaves. If we were placing bets on how long you would last, my money is on less than half a day."

An unpleasant silence followed.

But it did not last long.

There was no need to mention which way the power balance had tilted here.

"Enough. There is no point in hiding it any longer. Tell them everything, Captain."

It was a graceful voice, but it belonged to a wrinkled old woman.

The middle-aged man frantically looked back in time to see an old woman in a white coat receive support from Quenser and Heivia because the ground was slippery around the submarine.

"Ma'am!!"

"I said enough."

The way she cut the man off told Frolaytia this woman was not part of a military-style hierarchy.

The old woman's gray hair had some blonde remaining and she did not even glance in Rigas's direction.

"And in the worst case, any destination other than the Information Alliance will work. I can always defect to the Legitimacy Kingdom instead."

"!?"

"I only want one thing: asylum in a free location where the Information Alliance cannot reach me. Now, which group can better protect me: the Capitalist Corporations that failed after making an elementary mistake, or the Legitimacy

Kingdom that made up for that mistake?”

This comment made the Captain look like a chained dog, but it also made Frolaytia narrow her eyes in displeasure.

“You seem to be under the impression that you are Cinderella at your age, but we do not even know who you are. And do not think that you are good enough company that we would just accept this kind of trouble.”

“Isn’t your lack of information merely a failing on your part? Oh, excuse me. I can’t seem to shake that Information Alliance mindset, annoyingly enough.”

“Shall I box you up and ship you to New York?”

Even that old woman lightly raised her hands at the busty silver-haired commander’s words.

As had always been the case, the most frightening thing for a political criminal seeking asylum was being sent right back to their original country.

“Katarina Martini.”

She plainly confessed her name in a fairly theatrical way.

She was used to having her name work in her favor. And she maintained that irritating self-importance as she continued.

“Would you understand some of my value if you knew I was the one who created the Martini Series, an Information Alliance genius girl project that implanted talent into thousands of girls?”

Part 4

“Hello, Major. Have you finished checking what that submarine was carrying?”

Wraith seemed to be treating her like an online friend, but Frolaytia could not stop grimacing.

“…If you were within reach, I might have punched you.”

“You said that out loud, you savage with delusions of intelligence. The mother of the Martini Series is attempting to defect from the Information Alliance. Katarina Martini makes for quite the bombshell, doesn’t she? I mean, she will make for a most delicious prize for whoever grants her asylum. She could create a second or third Martini Series that fills a different sort of container, or she could find vulnerabilities in the girls who make up the core of the Information Alliance. Whatever the case, she makes for bait so incredible it could bring one of the world powers crumbling down.”

With a grunt of effort, the footage blurred a bit.

Wraith had apparently taken a quick hop while holding either a smartphone or camera. She was probably hopping from a dock to a cruiser.

She had previously mentioned that she was partitioned off from the Information Alliance’s standard military and was acting separately from them.

“Where are you planning to intervene from this time?” asked an irritated Frolaytia.

“Let’s just say it will be via a third country. You etiquette-obsessed swine are making a mess of New Caribbean Island, but this is all happening in the Information Alliance’s own-…hyah!?”

“?”

Frolaytia had to frown when little Wraithy suddenly jumped.

“I-I am fine. This had nothing to do with anything crawling around at my feet. (Oh, I can’t believe this. Knowing fish eat these gross things makes me never want to eat seafood again.)”

Wraith was muttering something, but she had not gone inside the boat. She was lying on a beach chair on the deck. She placed her communication device on the side table and relaxed.

“Now, I assume you are no longer willing to listen to anything I have to say.”

“…”

“Yes, when this concerns the mother of the Martini Series and one of her creations contacts you, even a ringlet curl ape with special blood in its veins can tell how dangerous things are. You have to be well aware that the Information Alliance is willing to wage war to preserve their secrets here.”

That was exactly right, but Frolaytia could find no logical reason for the girl to contact her. There was no point in giving advance warning of a head-on clash.

“My specialty is troubleshooting. No more, no less. I primarily find a way to deal with our own people’s shameful behavior, so I am not all that interested in an outside group like the Legitimacy Kingdom. That means I have nothing against you, but it also means I am not particularly fond of you either.”

“Your point?”

“That means the ‘true enemy’ I have my sights on is not you. So this time alone, I have no real reason to kill you. As I said, I doubt you’ll listen, but as a sign of my wonderful good conscience, I will give you one more warning. As an information specialist, I find it fascinating how much the same words must change before someone listens to them.”

Wraith grinned and her butler handed her a cold drink in a clear glass with lots of sliced fruit stuck around the edge.

“I am on your side this time. Keep that in mind and you will not regret it.”

Part 5

The situation had grown troublesome.

“Hyah, I thought it was supposed to hold off until nightfall.”

In her skintight special suit, the Princess splashed through the puddles as she fled below the eaves of the normal barracks. The dark crunchy chocolate of volcanic rock provided poor drainage, so puddles quickly formed when it rained and those soon grew to small ponds or lakes.

What had happened to the scorching sun from earlier in the day?

The sky was covered by thick clouds.

“I guess they get these sudden downpours everywhere in the world,” said Quenser with a sigh.

“I wonder if it has anything to do with the nitrogen and whatnot the Nitrogen

Mirage was spreading around. You know, like a meteorological weapon that fires a missile into the clouds to make it rain."

"I just hope it doesn't turn into photochemical smog."

They had been planning to lie on the beach chairs and stare at a mobile device. The waterproofed screen showed them what was happening in the interrogation room.

The Information Alliance's Nitrogen Mirage had apparently withdrawn once the Capitalist Corporations submarine had arrived at New Caribbean Island. It was about evenly matched with the Princess, but some line must have been crossed and they felt the need to rework their whole strategy.

So.

They could not deny that the Information Alliance's next strategy might be to blow away the entire bluefin tuna breeding base that Frolaytia had borrowed after begging her "onii-chan".

"Phew…"

The Princess quietly sighed below the eaves with her golden hair wet with rain. Her special suit revealed every contour of her body, so the boy's eyes followed the droplets flowing down her to burn every last curve into his brain.

Not even the strong downpour had cooled the area. It only increased the humidity, like pouring water on the heated stone in a sauna.

"This footage is really grainy."

"According to the electronic simulation division, the wiring is messed up. Frolaytia had the military parts attached onto the existing tuna base, so they were saying something about us exceeding the capacity on the grounding line that runs from the facility and into the ground."

"?"

"They called it electrolytic corrosion. Send too much electricity into the ground and the earth and moisture around the underground cable will work in place of an electrolytic solution. You know what electrolysis is, right?"

"The process that separates water into oxygen and hydrogen?"

"Yes, that. The same process can apparently break down the cable or steel

frames. This weird signal noise must be from corrosion to a fiber optic cable somewhere."

Quenser felt like a guy helping out the young woman next door hook up her TV and DVR, but he had to ask.

He pointed at the mobile device's screen as he did so.

"It doesn't really matter, but why are you so interested in this?"

"Well, because the old maintenance lady said she was helping with the interrogation."

Quenser just about asked why, but he found he could make a pretty good guess.

"Does she think the old woman will open up more to someone from her own generation?"

"We will of course have another witness there."

Meanwhile, the interrogation in question was beginning.

It would all be recorded and every last word and facial expression would be thoroughly analyzed, but Quenser and the Princess leaned forward to experience it live.

The camera must have been near the ceiling because the footage looked down on the two old women from a somewhat diagonal angle. The Legitimacy Kingdom and former Information Alliance women faced each other across a table bolted to the floor.

“It would seem neither one of us survived this long with a clean conscious.”

“Very true. I am jealous of your position since you don’t have to explain what it is you have done.”

“As someone who was done this myself, let me tell you that defection is not as optimistic a choice as you think it is.”

“There are times when you have to choose the lesser of two evils. Surely you understand that as someone who lived through that age.”

With only about a decade and a half of life under their belt, Quenser and the Princess could not imagine how much was hidden behind each of those words.

“The Martini Series is now viewed as living hardware to fill the holes in the Information Alliance’s administrative system. The idea is to make up for the deficiencies in the giant network by using human brains for the parts that computers cannot yet process. …Well, you could say that relationship between AI and humans is an expanded form of the Object-Elite arrangement that the Information Alliance has developed a few experimental examples of.”

“Based on that, it would seem the project was a success. As someone surrounded by the military in her research, you would have had all the money you could have wanted.”

“True enough. I was *too* successful.” Katarina gave a weary smile and elaborated as if gently nudging a giant metal ball from the top of a slope. “Personally, I only ever wanted just one member of the Martini Series. All that talk of living hardware to fill the holes in the machine-ruled administrative system was no more than a convenient way of gaining the research funding I needed. And even after they more or less threw cash my way, I never did manage to create a perfect Martini.”

“Was there a specific individual they were modeled after?”

“Cassandra Martini. She was my mother. She lived in that insane age before the four world powers formed, when Objects spent all their time wiping out land, sea, and air forces to prove the title of strongest belonged to them. In that truly lawless age of upheaval, she passed away protecting her young child to the very, very end. She is my personal hero and she is the purest, the original, and the truly perfect Martini.”

“…”

A short silence followed.

A parent protecting her child sounded like a simple thing, but since they had not lived in that time, Quenser and the Princess could not even imagine how difficult that must have been. And it was because that woman succeeded that Katarina Martini was here now.

“So you were driven by a juvenile drive toward womb regression.”

“Yes, the child attempts to create her mother and return to her protective care. The Martini Series was an experiment to take the MRI cross sections of the original, intentionally create the same ‘deviations’ in someone else’s brain, and give them the same balance as that genius. But from the very beginning, my research violated the rules of this world. I would rather not come off sounding like the Faith Organization, but perhaps you could say it was god’s will. As each roll of the dice continued to not come up in my favor, I found I had countless children who had each inherited just one cross section of my mother’s brain.”

The old maintenance lady let out a soft breath after listening this far.

And she did not hesitate to speak.

“So why do you want to defect? If you have an issue with your research environment and were hoping to get a fresh start elsewhere, the Legitimacy Kingdom’s answer is no. We aren’t going to hand you living children for your juvenile game of dress up.”

“Even though you continue to mass-produce Pilot Elites?”

“That might be a necessary evil in this godforsaken world. But what you’re doing is clearly more focused on your own little games.”

“The self-proclaimed sensible side in the Information Alliance said the same thing at first. But when faced with geniuses who were completely off the charts, that alleged sense of theirs was clouded by greed.”

That demon scoffed.

Almost like she had held this same conversation many, many times before.

“…But that is not the crux of the issue. It is true I am displeased with the Martini Series’s failure, but I do not wish to do any of that ever again.”

“What?”

“The Martini Series carries a severe problem, so I am seeking the assistance of a powerful force that can fight them and eliminate them from the Information

Alliance's system."

"You made these children, but now you've deemed them failures and plan to kill them yourself!? Using war and assassinations!?"

"Just hear me out."

With that, Katarina placed a hand on her own aged chest.

No, that was not quite accurate.

It was unclear when she had picked it up, but she held a Legitimacy Kingdom mobile device just like the one Quenser and the Princess were watching the footage on.

When it emitted a beeping sound, the people in the interrogation room also noticed something was wrong.

But Katarina tossed it onto the table before they could do anything.

"I kept the truly sensitive data embedded in my heart. I placed the files in my pacemaker's unused memory and set it up for contactless extraction, just like the automatic ticket gates at a train station."

"…What…is this?"

"The core of the Martini Series's problem. This is a history of the life my mother, Cassandra Martini, lived under a second handle name."

The old maintenance woman was speechless.

The footage did not let Quenser and the Princess see what she was reading.

But they could tell it was something shocking.

"My mother was a rational killer. …Although, in that age of insufficient resources, it may have been necessary if she was to support a young child like me."

Katarina was blunt as she discussed the woman she had called her personal hero.

"That was a lawless age of upheaval. That file provides details on 39 incidents or uprisings that can no longer be investigated. These records must have been like a trophy to her. Succeed or fail, she would write out the series of events and add a flowchart leading to the next incident. Unsatisfied with a single coincidental success, my mother used this to refine her skills. Yes, her skills as a professional

who systematically plundered from highly secure facilities, both military and civilian."

"So…so this is what you meant?"

"I only learned of this truth after I began the genius girl project in search of my mother. And as a result, I cannot even predict how much of my mother's violence any one of them inherited. The closer to perfection they came, the more willing they will be to kill people as long as it is 'rational'. In the worst case, every last one of them may have reached that threshold."

"Didn't you say the Martini Series numbers in the thousands and has worked its way deep into the Information Alliance administration and military!? If the original's violence has been reproduced in them, they won't just rely on knives or guns. What if they take the great influence they have been given and begin 'prowling around' using it as a weapon!?"

"You should assume the state and military are entirely controlled by the kind of people who would readily kill the elderly or the very young to have fewer mouths to feed during a famine. We might see the onset of an age of joyous malice that makes the oppression and slaughter of the infamous witch hunts pale in comparison. In fact, it may already be starting simultaneously across Information Alliance-controlled territory."

Quenser and the Princes exchanged a glance.

In this case, they could not expect the Information Alliance to purify itself. After all, the budding violence would come from the genius girls who had been positioned to fill the holes in the supercomputer-controlled administration and military. They had been placed in control of a worldwide vulnerability from the beginning, so they could bring the normal system crashing down just by switching off their own duties.

And Katarina would not have chosen to defect without good reason.

She had to have worked to fix the problem from within the Information Alliance. She had only shifted focus to an external attack because those efforts had produced no meaningful results.

Was that because no one around her could sense the danger?

Or had some member of the Martini Series already gone around and made sure nothing could be done?

“This age is supported by the constant conflict between the four world powers. It sounds strange, but that balance will fall apart if one of our enemies truly collapses.”

“…”

“So if the Information Alliance crumbles from within, the table supported by those four legs will fall over. Once that happens, the entire clean war concept will vanish like so much mist.”

For some reason, those words brought Quenser’s childhood friend Monica to his mind. She had been a haughty and sharp-tongued noble girl until her family had collapsed one day. Then she had been pursued by the people of their town and forced to tremble with her family in a commoner family’s small food pantry. The shift to a new age was not always a positive change. No matter what choices someone made, a great power outside their control could decide whether they would have fortune or misfortune. That was a nightmarish idea for a commoner like Quenser who was constantly oppressed and forced to obey the decisions made for him.

And now chaos on that same level – no, on an even greater level – would spread around the entire world.

“We might see a return of that lawless age of upheaval my mother secretly thrived in. I could easily see it happening if they decide to end this fattened age of temporary peace and instead live a life ruled by rationality and efficiency.”

Part 6

“……
……”

Frolaytia Capistrano maintained a stony silence with an expression to match.

On her laptop screen, Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had withdrawn into her cruiser where she was casually selecting a swimsuit.

“Hey, Frank, I’ll go with this one. We aren’t on our way to have some fun, so something that covers this much skin would be best. We have to take this

seriously."

The butler-like young man only ever agreed with his arrogant master, so it was up to the busty silver-haired commander to confront the girl who was blowing up a swim ring despite what she said.

"Hey, brat." Her voice seemed to rise up from the depths of the earth. "That's what people call a school swimsuit."

"Oh, I am well aware. This is a legend from that technological powerhouse of the Island Nation, isn't it? I can't seem to figure it out myself, but the incredible knowledge contained within this swimsuit must be ahead of its time. Yes, how could I choose anything else before heading out to the battlefield? This battle costume has a real…I suppose you would call it an aura."

"I am only contacting you as a form of insurance. I know you people are as hard to kill as a roach infestation, so I'm betting on you not collapsing quite so easily."

"…"

"From the barbs in your voice, I can only assume you insects have finally heard the truth of the Martini Series." Wraith laughed and spread the simple swimsuit out between her hands. "The more you learn, the more it traps you. And no further information will bring any peace of mind. It's like a bog, and is the worst case scenario in information warfare. Do you understand now what it means to take on the Information Alliance?"

"I doubt an actual murder machine would give me an honest answer, but I'll ask anyway: Are you a murder machine?"

"I would like to say everyone participating in war is one, but no one likes a philosopher on the battlefield. And I guess jokes will only harm your impression of me. …To be honest, that is the exact question I am trying to answer."

"Are you afraid of your origins?"

"Very much so. And as something like the early signs of an earthquake, the primary researcher is now attempting to defect to some distant land. Do you see now why I am in such a rush?"

"What good is asking her? If Dr. Frankenstein tells you you aren't a monster, would you, as her creation, really believe her?"

"…Perhaps not."

Here alone, Wraith had the look of a weary old woman in her eyes.

The butler-like young man gently supported her shoulders from behind, so the blonde girl shut her eyes and leaned back.

“It’s the dilemma of searching your own name. You know the search isn’t going to turn up anything pleasant, but you can’t relax until you do it anyway. You aren’t hoping to find something good; you’re investigating yourself because you fear there is something bad out there. And you keep doing it over and over.”

“…”

“By the way, Major. Even a fool like you is free to view me hostilely and I cannot stop you there, but I do have one piece of advice. You are of course free to believe me or not.” The girl opened her eyes and the usual intensity had returned to them. “There are thousands of Martinis throughout the Information Alliance. So I may not be the only monster who was sent to this region of sea.”

“You mean…?”

“Because of my distance from the standard army, it’s difficult for me to determine who exactly it is. …But, Major, you should consider every possibility right now. Because every last member of the Martini Series holds some kind of emotion for our designer, Katarina Martini. And that emotion could be love or hatred.”

Part 7

A dull thudding sound repeated on and on without end.

Frolaytia had laid her head down on a briefing room table and she was banging her forehead against it with a truly displeased look on her face.

“(Wow, I don’t want to get anywhere near her right now.)”

“Heivia.”

“Why do you have to call me over now of all times!?”

When he heard the low voice slip out from the gap between face and table, Heivia jumped right up into the air. But whatever his reasons were, he had to

obey in the military. There was simply no way for a private to outdo a major.

“When did we start having to protect scum that doesn’t even belong to the Legitimacy Kingdom? Answer me.”

“Which mode do you want here? The teacher’s pet or the back alley drunk? … Well, let’s see. We are a peacekeeping force that attempts to share the common asset of world peace with everyone for the stability and prosperity of the entire international society, so…”

“No one wants that teacher’s pet answer, you dumbass!!”

“Agh, I chose wrong!?”

It was a ridiculous demand, but that was how the military hierarchy worked. If anything did not work out, the higher ups could simply blame it on their subordinates.

(I need to become the head of my family so I can boss these meatheads around.)

“You look like you have something to say, Heivia.”

“What, are you policing my thoughts now too!? What a pain in the ass!!”

Frolaytia finally lifted her head from the table. And it seemed she intended to look him in the eye while continuing the conversation. Realizing he was not going to be released anytime soon, Heivia sat across the table from her.

The Major began speaking with her boobs resting on the table.

“We have a few problems here.”

“Including a busty, silver-haired commander who exploits her workforce. … Whoa!?”

When the end of the long, narrow *kiseru* dropped right next to the hand he was resting on the table, Heivia just about jumped straight up along with his chair.

Frolaytia ignored that and continued.

“First, is what this *alleged* Katarina Martini says really true? Keeping this a secret is working against us. Our intelligence division has been negotiating with their Information Alliance contacts, but the most they’ve managed to do is confirm the name Katarina. They have yet to get a photograph.”

“Yeah, if that part isn’t true, this whole thing falls apart. And weaponizing information to sow confusion is exactly the kind of thing they would do.”

Heivia answered with his eyes glued to the boobs changing shape atop the table, but Frolaytia was apparently too irritated to notice. She lethargically brushed the hair off the side of her face.

“Second, even if that old woman really is Katarina and she is telling the truth, how much does the Information Alliance know? Why was the Nitrogen Mirage sent here? Was it simply to retrieve or kill the defector and prevent an information leak, or was it sent by the Martini Series?”

“Well…that might change what kind of aftertaste this leaves with us, but is it really all that important? It’s an enemy Object either way, so can’t we just have the Princess blow it away?”

He received a blatant tongue click from across the table.

She must not have liked something about that, but Heivia knew asking about it would only bring more trouble, so he simply accepted his reward with a smile.

“Knowing whether our enemy is a Martini or not would tell us how persistent their pursuit will be, but fine. …Third, if the Martini Series really is carrying this time bomb, what can we do? The Nitrogen Mirage is only the vanguard, so blowing it up isn’t enough to earn a happily-ever-after.”

“What? If we get that old woman to Legitimacy Kingdom territory and send the data she has to the top brass of the Information Alliance…no, wait. That wouldn’t work.”

“The Martini Series has already worked its way deep into their administration and military. Any warning sent like that would just be suppressed.”

The world was like a car supported by four tires and one of those tires was trying to puncture itself. They knew it was happening, but there was nothing they could do. They did not particularly care if the Information Alliance destroyed itself, but they did not want to be caught in the great crash afterwards.

Looking annoyed, Frolaytia once more laid her head on the table.

“…We have so much on our plate here. This would be so much simpler if this alleged Katarina Martini turned out to be lying about everything and the world isn’t in any real danger at all.”

“Wishes can’t alter reality.”

“I know. War would be easy if the bullets avoided you as long as you wished hard enough. And the military needs to assume we’re always a step away from the worst case scenario.”

“Meaning?”

“We need to face the possibility that the Martini Series is near collapse. The real question is what we do about it…”

Part 8

Wraith Martini Vermouthspray stood below the blue sky after taking her fancy cruiser out to sea. The feel of the unfamiliar swimsuit must have bothered her because she reached for her small butt and stuck her index finger below the edge to adjust it.

To allow the bluefin tuna population to grow, fishing boats generally did not cruise through this area. The region of sea was primarily used for the idle rich to enjoy diving or some scenic sex, but now a great many ships were fleeing through it to avoid the naval battle being fought across the horizon. Thanks to that, no one would notice a suspicious radar blip on their sea chart.

“Frank.”

When she called for her subordinate, the tall young man walked over without a word or even a noise. The rocking of the boat did not hinder him at all. He was always like this. He was so perfect, so skilled…and so obedient that he did not truly fill the hole of loneliness in the girl’s heart.

She was a troubleshooting specialist, the Stopgap Grim Reaper.

That role meant she more often targeted her allies’ backs than an external enemy.

That meant a bodyguard whose skills were not up to snuff would be meaningless, so only someone as sharply honed as him could serve her.

The ones who had been great company had died first and this young man was the only one who had survived this long.

The silliness in the Mekong District had reminded Wraith of a forgotten period of her life.

Those were the kind of people who vanished from her workplace.

The grim reaper slowly narrowed her yes and whispered to her loyal servant.

"…Am I insane?"

She grimaced as soon as she said it.

What good was asking that question to a dog who knew only how to obey? Frank could only coldly do as Wraith said or infer the answer she wanted by viewing her expression. Either way, she could not draw out his honest thoughts. That was hardly surprising after he had seen so many of his colleagues fall to deadly bullets after disobeying one of Wraith's selfish orders and running off to rescue the unit at the center of a scandal.

He would not rid the girl of her loneliness.

This was like a curse of Wraith's own making by only allowing the most obedient by her side.

The small blonde girl knew how sick of this she was, so she shook her head. She smiled bitterly at how much she craved disobedience.

She thought of Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell.

And then she looked to Frank who was their polar opposite. Finally, she spat out some words that seemed to stab into her own heart.

"I can't be picky when I set it up this way myself."

Part 9

What were they to do if they assumed the Martini Series was near collapse?

This was their answer:

"Can we really gather information with this thing?"

“Just watch. Besides, we’ve long since passed the days when actual people are sent in for spy work. Although this was originally a personal project to see if it could help with maintenance inside the Object.”

The excitement was occurring in the electronic simulation division’s space. Quite a few people were gathered in that filthy room that smelled of dried squid and was known as either the toy box or the junk room.

The chorus pounding on the roof had ceased, so the unexpected downpour must have ended.

But rain or shine, this person was just as talkative. The technician who was introverted but wanted recognition was Lilim Gazette, Age 17 (♀). She was the type who had few inhibitions on her blog but grew much more withdrawn at an offline meeting, so she was fairly flustered from all the attention on her.

“It was lucky this was a bluefin tuna breeding base. To determine the migration route the tuna take, they embed transmitters in a few samples and have them swim around. That means the Information Alliance should just ignore any suspicious signals coming from the ocean. More than that, we can use those transmitters as wireless routers.”

“And you attached thumb-sized spy robots on the back of those tuna?”

“Do you have any idea how fast those sushi ingredients swim through the ocean? They’re faster than some torpedoes. A toast to Sir Bloodrics and his Island Nation obsession!!”

“Let’s see,” said Quenser as he pulled out an analog paper sea chart. It seemed out of place in the electronic simulation division that wanted to turn everything into data, but spreading out the sea chart on the table and lining up kid’s meal toy ships made it feel more like a simulation game.

“We’re on New Caribbean Island which is here. The Information Alliance fleet is holding position 120km north of that. Umm, if I place the tuna migration route on the map…”

“This should work. And if it doesn’t, we can always place them on the backs of seabirds that will carry them over.”

The Princess seemed somewhat zoned out as she poked at a spy robot sitting on a shelf. It was three or four centimeters long, its shiny silver body was made of a few overlapping panels, and a bunch of tiny legs could be seen when it was flipped over. It may have been based on a pill bug…no, on a wharf roach.

The necessary tuna had been captured and set up in advance. That jewel of the sea had already been released and it was quickly approaching the Information Alliance ships. The indecent LCD screens in here normally only displayed fighting games or swimsuit models, but one of them now showed the giant propeller of a warship from below. Using the tuna had been even more useful than expected because the footage was surprisingly stable. The wharf roach that had hitched a ride both physically and signal-wise was doing perfectly.

“Incredible,” said Heivia as he watched from the side. “If we converted one of those into a tuna torpedo, we could sink them like this.”

“They would learn what to look out for after the first time and we’d be excoriated in an international conference. Those things are still protected ingredients that nobles spend a fortune on.”

Undaunted, Quenser tried to learn as much as he could about this rival technician’s technology.

“But how do you get the spy robot up onto the ship? Tuna don’t jump out of the water like dolphins, do they?”

“Heh heh heh. They’re lighter than water, so if they let go of the tuna’s back, they’ll float right up to the surface. From there, they just have to ride the waves to the side of the ship. They can also kick at the water with their feet when the waves aren’t enough or they need to adjust their direction. No matter how steep a slope it is, these cute little wharf roaches can climb right on up.”

Is that how it works? wondered Quenser and Heivia as they and the other potatoes focused on the screen.

But then an accident occurred.

“Urp, ughh… Th-the footage…is rocking in the waves…”

“Keep at it, Lilim. Don’t let go of that stick that’s been so worn out from playing too many fighting games. This was your idea, wasn’t it?”

About half of the potatoes were hit by the motion sickness, but it was especially bad for Lilim Gazette, Age 17 (←Important), who was leaning forward and focusing more than any of the others. But all Quenser could do for the pale-faced girl was create a double-layer motion sickness bag out a plastic bag and a paper bag.

But after a long and hard battle, she managed to attach the spy robot to the side

of the ship by using the long-range remote control system that was hijacking the tuna tracking signal.

“That’s their command ship, the Flagship 019. Let’s see what they’re up to.”

“Wait, isn’t that the ship we saved before!? I knew helping someone was only going to come back to bite us!!”

“That captain was sent elsewhere, so I imagine it’s being run by someone else entirely.”

Once the spy robot had attached to the side of the 200m battlecruiser, the footage did not move around nearly as much. That said, it was still out at sea, so the movement did not vanish entirely.

While undergoing an internal struggle, Lilim used the hijacked signal to send the spy robot further and further up the ship. Some of the potatoes watched on from the side and others had been defeated and driven to vomit, so it was a dramatic scene of sweat and tears for a variety of reasons. It may have taken a different form than usual, but this was undoubtedly war.

After climbing the steel wall that leaned out further than vertical, the wharf roach arrived on the deck. However, this was where its mission truly began.

“Okay, let’s review, Lilim. Frolaytia wants to know who it is commanding the Nitrogen Mirage. She wants to know if the Martini Series is interfering in any way, so let’s work at figuring that out.”

“While you’re at it, try to find any classified data or blueprints for the Nitrogen Mirage itself,” added the Princess. “It would be great if there was a maintenance manual lying around.”

Just then, something like a giant suspended ceiling of rubber fell down and the screen went dark.

“Eh? Ah!? What, what, what!? The signal just cut off!!”

“Was that…? I really don’t want to accept this, Quenser, but I recognized that zigzag pattern on the falling ceiling…”

“”Don’t pass this off to me! And don’t you say it! Don’t say that was the sole of an unsuspecting Information Alliance soldier’s boot!!”

“…”

“What’s wrong, Lilim!? C-c’mon, reaching for that motion sickness bag is like accepting defeat! Ahhh!!”

Something must have snapped inside her when all her effort went to waste, so the 17-year-old gave in quite spectacularly. Their dreams destroyed, Quenser and Heivia could not suppress the tears.

Good camouflage could be a problem in its own way.

But Lilim Gazette seemed to have recovered now that her stomach was emptied out.

“D-don’t worry. A bluefin tuna weighs 350 kilograms. We could fit tons of finger-sized spy robots on that thing, so we’ve got plenty of extra lives!!”

They had apparently scattered a lot of the small robots across the ocean surface like bait. The 17-year-old accessed another one and tried again at this instant-death action game.

“Wait, Lilim. You have to memorize that fat guard’s patrol route!!”

“…”

“Ahh, that’s a rat. You were eaten by a rat!!”

“……”

“Are you stupid!? How do you fall from the ceiling plumbing and drop right into the toilet!? Waaahh!!”

“Urp… I-I can’t take any more of this!”

She should not have had anything left in her stomach, but Lilim Gazette, Age 17, (who was quickly acquiring a new defining trait) grabbed the barf bag and began dry heaving. Still, she had made it pretty far. This was their chance to acquire some classified information, so they could not have her give up here.

“Lilim.”

“…(Tremble, tremble)”

“Please, Lilim. Do us a favor and gently grab this thick and curved stick again!!”

“Stop!! Don’t put that dirty stick in my face!!”

…She seemed to have been deeply traumatized. Even the potatoes started feeling sorry for her as they surrounded her and poked hard things against her cheeks that were puffed out to fight the rising urge to vomit.

Plus, Quenser and the others wanted to try their hand at this. However, this instant-death action game was too difficult for just anyone to play. In fact, if even the developer herself could not beat it, a real video game would have received nothing but complaints.

“Does anyone here know how to use joysticks like this?”

“Yes, we need someone with plenty of qualifications, who’s skilled with their hands, and could probably pilot just about anything…”

As Quenser and Heivia listed off the conditions, the potatoes’ gazes all gathered on one person.

The person pushed up to stardom in place of the 17-year-old vomit girl was a pure wildflower and their true jack-of-all-trades: Myonri.

“Eh? Ehhh!?”

“Please, Myonri.”

“Please wait! There’s someone on the floor right over there showing what this does to you! This is a demonic machine that no girl should ever touch!”

“We get that, but please just grab this stick. You can look down and slowly, hesitantly reach out your trembling hand. You can even shut one eye like you’re being handed a water balloon that might burst at any moment.”

Meanwhile, the Princess was adorably and silently puffing out her cheeks at receiving no attention whatsoever despite this being a piloting mission.

And despite how much she complained, Myonri got the hang of it super fast once she got started.

“Hmm. So you don’t move each individual leg. You just tell it front, left, or right and it does the rest for you. It can move forward or turn to the left or right, but it can’t back up. And when it reaches a wall head on, it automatically performs the action to climb up the wall. This is really neat.”

“…I see Myonri’s the type to intentionally let a few of them die to test things out.”

“And that smile on her face as she sends them to their death kind of scares me. Is

this what girls are like on the inside…?”

The cute little wharf roach had left the simple floor and was instead crawling along the ceiling as it moved deeper and deeper into the ship. It could not pass through the watertight doors that did not leave any gap at all and the hijacked tuna signal could not reach too far inside, but other than that, it provided a high level of freedom.

“What can this thing do?”

“Umm, it was originally meant for Object maintenance, right? In addition to the standard camera and microphone, it can apparently intercept local signals. That means phone calls and emails too. Of course, it will all still be encrypted, so we’ll need another computer to handle the decryption.”

The spy robot was surprisingly high spec.

It was fun using it themselves, but they did not want to be on the receiving end.

“Zzz…mutter, mutter…”

The Princess must have gotten sick of being ignored because she had gone to sleep in the middle of the mission.

And since she leaned defenselessly against Quenser, the rest of the potatoes’ hostility focused in on him.

“Okay, that’s it. We need to kill him.”

“Okay, that’s it. We need to kill him.”

“Okay, that’s it. We need to kill him.”

“Hey, I thought it was my turn to be the center of attention!” protested Myonri. “I’ll quit on you, dammit!!”

When the less noticeable girl grew tearful, everyone focused back on her.

Everyone faced Myonri like they were looking at someone who had tried to up their popularity on a social network by announcing they were shorting some stock and then got arrested for it.

“Umm, we drew up a diagram of the Flagship 019 before, right? Y’know, when taking measurements for the rescue operation.”

“We wouldn’t know since we were looking after some tanks at the time. But is this it?”

“Hmm… It looks like they won’t let us into the bridge or combat command. And I’m afraid the tuna signal won’t reach very far inside…”

“Wait, Myonri, then where are you headed?”

“The best place to find sensitive information has always been the break room.”

She once more causally revealed the true face of girls. The potatoes’ balls shriveled up and they did not want to direct the conversation any further in that direction, but they were the ones who had put her in control. Quenser focused on the soft sensation of the napping Princess in order to tilt the scales toward his ideal image of girls. He would not have much of a future if he grew disillusioned with teenage girls at his age.

He watched the cute little wharf roach that was infiltrating the ship using a tuna signal.

A lot of girls in white sailor uniforms were gathered there.

“Wow, they’re squatting, wow! And they’re scratching *there* quite a bit! Ah, ahh!! I don’t want to see this! I don’t want to see any more of this group!!”

“Be quiet. I can’t hear what they’re saying.”

“But all they’re talking about is who slept with who and how someone got promoted so fast by screwing their commander!”

“I said be quiet!! Mhh, this is a big deal…!!”

This seemed to have lit some kind of fire in Myonri.

The potatoes tilted their heads and wondered if the entire mission had gotten sidetracked, but then something happened on the screen.

“Hi, everyone. Mind if I join you?”

“Geh! It’s Little Miss Perfect!”

“The name is Piranirie Martini Smoky. And being a genius girl can actual make it easier to get stiff shoulders. Oh, or is it taboo to mention stiff shoulders when you don’t have any boobs?”

A small girl of about 13 joined that no-rules death match.

Most of the girls wore sailor uniforms because they were in fact sailors, but this new girl with wavy black hair was somewhat different. She wore a blue parade coat with gold stitching on top of her uniform. The sleeves were baggy enough that only her fingertips poked out and the hem dragged along the floor. It actually seemed to accentuate how short she was. And it was blue. That color was used in the Princess's special suit since it symbolized the Legitimacy Kingdom, but it was best avoided for a naval force. It was well known for making someone harder to find if they fell overboard. Since she had gone out of her way to wear something like that, she must have had the same privilege as a Pilot Elite to overpower a group with her own individual ability.

But she had given some important information for Quenser who had a girl's head on his shoulder like he was being blessed on the train ride back from school. He looked to that girl who was skillfully spinning a fountain pen with the fingertips poking out of her baggy sleeve.

"One of the Martini Series…? So are they really interfering with this mission?"

He demanded someone quickly check with Katarina, but Heivia only dug out some earwax with a dubious look on his face. Quenser's message had not reached anyone.

"But do you really need to hold this girls gathering in such a cramped place?" asked the girl on the screen. "You could always go somewhere with more space."

"…We have our reasons."

"Heh heh. So you still have enough innocence left to care what the boys think about you."

"Why you…!!"

"Good, good. You're so cute. …Oh, and you can punch me if you want, but leave a bruise anywhere visible and it's game over for you. In fact, if I just so happened to trip and hit my forehead here, you would never receive another promotion. Never. Ever☆"

"…"

"That's more like it. It has not been easy making all the necessary adjustments with those old men at the top, so let's be more candid down here. I made sure to leave behind my safety device – that guy who looks after me – so I really was just

hoping to relax.”

Piranirie sounded casual enough, but her cheerful tone hid a hint of mockery. She may have been used to this kind of treatment.

She controlled the people around her by taking advantage of how delicately she had to be handled.

Finally, one of the girls in the break room hesitantly opened her mouth.

“Um, does that have anything to do with why we haven’t seen any of the guys recently?”

“Yes. This is what I was trying to convince those old men to do.”

Piranirie Martini Smoky casually confirmed it.

And…

“If we really want to get that defector back, is this any time to be pitting Objects against each other? Save me this clean war nonsense. The only real answer is to put together a team of divers and attack the Legitimacy Kingdom base. I mean, it’s a remote island. Who’s gonna see?☆”

Just as a chill ran down all of their backs, the windowless electronic simulation division room’s lights went out and they were surrounded by complete darkness.

Part 10

“Tch. So it’s started. Your test has begun, Legitimacy Kingdom.”

While still bothered by the butt of her black one-piece swimsuit (which was apparently called a school swimsuit in the Island Nation), Wraith Martini Vermouthspray spoke quietly on her cruiser.

“Don’t you die yet, my beloved fools.”

Part 11

They heard an explosion and felt a tremor.

Gunfire followed.

Only now did Quenser realize his mobile device and radio were not functioning. Powerful jamming must have begun at the same time as the blackout.

The enemy had no intention of hiding it any longer.

“Oh, no! This doesn’t sound like the infiltration phase! They’ve already set everything up and are starting the attack phase!!”

“More importantly, what caused them to start shooting? Their target is that old woman named Katarina Martini, right!? I doubt they would be shooting this much before reaching her!!”

The Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes shouted to each other as they swiftly got to work. The sleeping Princess woke up with no need for an alarm clock.

They split into two general groups.

The first was a search team confirming the safety of Katarina Martini. The second was a bodyguard team guiding the Princess to the Baby Magnum where she would be most safe.

“Even with all the insanity at that silo city, the maintenance base still functioned as a shield. But as soon as the Martini Series shows up, we get this!”

“You only realize how much you liked a rule after it’s been broken. The collapse of the Martini Series has arrived. If we don’t stop it here, this will spread to the safe countries around the world.”

The enemy was already breaking the rules, so they would have no way of stopping the violence if they lost their Object. Then they would have no one to stop the Nitrogen Mirage from reaching New Caribbean Island.

They wanted to know more about Piranirie Martini Smoky. They had to see Katarina to approach the core of this, but Quenser and Heivia had chosen to guard the Princess. Without solidifying their footing, they would be unable to advance any further.

Heivia raised his assault rifle as he spoke.

“This is bad… We’ve reached an age of slaughter led by rational killers. I feel bad for the Information Alliance soldiers for being sent out by someone like that…”

“Those arguments are meaningless if we don’t win first.”

“Damn right!”

The gloomy and windowless electronic simulation division room was one thing, but it was a sunny day outside. And yet Heivia groaned as soon as he opened the door.

They could not see.

A pink chemical smokescreen was obscuring their vision. They could not even see the crunchy chocolate volcanic rock below their feet.

“Ugh, cough!! This is the worst. Watch out for enemy attack and friendly fire!!”

“My eyes are watering…” muttered the Princess.

It was all over if he lost sight of her, so Quenser firmly held her hand.

“So what are we supposed to do?” he asked.

“Grab the Princess’s head and have her crouch down. Don’t let that VIP’s head get any higher than our you-know-whats!”

The enemy did not seem to be evenly spread across the island. They could hear gunshots from a short distance away. And the smokescreen did not seem to have been fired at them in particular. It had only been blown here by the wind.

“This tuna base is basically a noble’s manor, right? And an enemy nation is seriously trespassing and firing guns? If Sir Bloodrics had a short temper, this would trigger an international incident…”

“The war has already begun, you moron! And it sounds like the worst of it is at the detention barracks where we hold POWs. This isn’t random. They know the layout.”

Myonri drove a military truck over from the front of the building.

Even if the smokescreen was only what the wind had blown over, they could barely see anymore. Quenser opened the back door, pushed on the Princess’s

small butt to help her inside, and then climbed in after her. Heivia circled around to the passenger side and then clicked his tongue.

“Damn, if I was gonna operate the heavy machinegun on the roof, I should’ve gone to the back!!”

The Princess tilted her head at that.

“I could be the gunner.”

“Quenser, you can grab her this one time! Just stop the Princess! In what world do you stick your VIP up on the roof!?”

“We don’t have time, so I’m leaving with or without you!”

With almost zero visibility, Myonri clenched her teeth together and floored it with a submachinegun in her lap.

Not ten meters into their drive, what could only have been a human silhouette was sent flying by the bumper. Myonri screamed and started to brake, but Heivia slapped her head from the passenger seat.

“That was an Information Alliance uniform, so one down! Keep going!!”

The drive was entirely reliant on luck. All the windows were covered with walls of pink, so it was easy to lose your sense of direction. They had to determine direction from the compass in their hand instead of the sun in the sky.

“But don’t trust that too much, Myonri. This is an artificial island made from volcanic rock, so it’s chock full of metal. That can mess with the geomagnetism, so the needle might change directions.”

“Can someone with two hands free please handle the navigation!?”

“That soldier you just hit was carrying a drum and cables.” Quenser had a knack for not hearing anything he did not want to hear. “They brought combat engineers who specialize in explosives just like me. And New Caribbean Island was made by gathering magma using artificial earthquakes triggered by a ton of explosives, right?”

“Are you kidding me!? If there’s an eruption now, we’ve got nowhere to run!”

The idiot duo’s conversation seemed to have inspired enough fear in Myonri to have a negative sort of awakening.

While driving through the thick smokescreen, she used her instincts to lock onto silhouettes and ran over several enemy soldiers in a row.

The Princess turned her emotionless eyes outside the window which seemed coated with cotton candy and she listened to the gunshots coming from mostly one direction.

“There’s no hesitation in their movements… Do they have a drone flying overhead for support?”

“In this smokescreen? They set it up, so how are they telling friend from foe?”

“How should I know?” said Heivia. “Maybe they have IR markers on all their allies. We don’t have time to check one of their corpses, though. Getting the Princess onboard her Object comes first!”

A few dull explosions rang out.

It came from their destination.

“The Object hangar is under attack,” said the Princess.

“The reactor stays active even when it’s on standby, right? If they get inside and mess with the reactor, this entire island could be wiped from the map…”

“That would be terrible, but not even a nuke can destroy the Baby Magnum, so I doubt they can break it open so easily. Let’s get in there before we lose our foothold!!”

The smokescreen really was the worst.

Myonri crashed the truck not through the wide-open front door entrance but through a completely normal and entirely unrelated wall.

The engine grill was crushed like an empty can and Quenser’s butt rose from his seat and he gave a rather forceful kiss to the driver’s seat headrest.

“Bwah!?”

“Quenser, you idiot. You’re supposed to act as the Princess’s meat cushion at times like this.”

Myonri tried shifting into reverse and backing out, but it was no use.

“Dammit. My eyes are stinging again. Prepare yourselves!!”

Heivia placed a hand on her shoulder as a signal and then left through the passenger side door. Quenser grabbed the Princess's slender shoulders and they jumped out of the back seat and onto the rough black ground.

The sound of gunfire pounded at their entire bodies instead of just their eardrums.

"It's close," said the Princess. "That gunfire is coming from inside."

Quenser looked around and moved so nervously it was unclear who was protecting who.

"This is bad. Those are definitely the sounds of war. I could really die here."

"Quenser, why did you even come out to the battlefield countries anyway?" said Heivia.

They choked on the smokescreen, but they had no choice but to keep going.

Quenser, Heivia, and Myonri surrounded the Princess in a single clump as the potatoes moved along the giant hangar wall. They came across a human-sized entrance on one side.

"Armageddon is underway in there. Quenser, you take a gun just in case."

While pressed against the wall, Heivia tossed over his magnum sidearm, but it was not his awful friend who caught it. The Princess reached over and grabbed it first.

"I'm worried about the old lady," said the expressionless girl.

Heivia and Myonri were unsure what to do when she immediately started aiming it around, but they had to chase after her regardless.

The aforementioned old lady must have realized reinforcements had arrived because her familiar voice reached them from atop the scaffolding.

"Watch out for 25mm grenades! They fire them in quick succession and they're smart weapons!!"

"Are you kidding me?" muttered Heivia in shock as they hid behind some spare onion armor stacked up to waist height.

With smart weapons, it was game over once the electronically-controlled sight locked onto them. The grenades would alter their trajectory midflight to

accurately hit them. And hiding behind cover would not be enough to escape. If they fled behind any kind of shield, the enemy just had to fire somewhere past the cover so the shrapnel would do lethal damage to everything behind the shield. If they were driven out by those and then shot down with rifle bullets, they would never recover.

But that also told them something.

(How are the launcher and the grenade linked? They're jamming the place and infrared wouldn't work well in this heat. And if this chemical smokescreen is blocking out all kinds of light, everything from IR to UV would be suspect. In that case…)

"The grenades are coming! Get down and protect your head!!"

"Kh."

Just like with hand grenades, the standard was to attack from two places at once.

Even if they took care of one attacker, the other explosion would get them.

While Heivia and Myonri tearfully covered their head with their hands, Quenser alone did something odd. He opened the door to a nearby fire hydrant, pulled out the thick hose, and aimed the nozzle toward the Information Alliance soldiers.

He gave it a somewhat wide-angle spray by rotating the metal ring surrounding the nozzle and he forcibly held the bucking hose in place as the high-pressure water shot out.

That was precisely when the 25mm cylinders flew out in parabolic arcs, but they soon turned in the wrong direction. The explosive noise and shockwaves pounded on their right ears, but Quenser's group was unharmed.

"Wow…"

"With a wide-angle spray, it's a lot like a searchlight, so controlling it isn't hard. More importantly, Heivia, you take over the hose. Don't move too far forward and get yourself shot, okay?"

"Wait, hold on! What are you gonna do!?"

"I'll be making some sparks with the circular saw in the work area back there, so cover me."

"Why!? Are you making some kind of secret weapon!?"

“They aren’t using radio or IR. But the old lady’s voice reached us loud and clear. It’s ultrasound. They’re sending out their signals using sound waves beyond the audible range.”

Heivia looked surprised, so Quenser drove his point home.

“That’s also why they bothered with a blackout in the middle of the day. They wanted to shut off any kind of speaker. But handheld power tools are generally battery-powered. If I make a whole bunch of noise scraping at metal, the smart control of their grenades and their markers preventing friendly fire won’t work anymore!”

They did not have time to hesitate.

Quenser could not use a gun properly, but he ran over to the work bench while Heivia created a barrier against the grenade launchers and rifles using the firehose water and Myonri fired her submachinegun to keep the enemy soldiers behind cover.

Once he pressed the rapidly-rotating blade against a thick metal panel and orange sparks scattered everywhere, things began to change.

The detonation of the grenades was program-controlled, so once that function was lost, the enemy was outnumbered. The firehose was no longer necessary. The potatoes used cover to accurately avoid the line of fire as they surrounded the Information Alliance attackers and mercilessly filled them with lead.

Historically, strategists and tricksters would occasionally have their time in the limelight, but there was one thing they had to watch out for. Their fame was all well and good when they were winning, but their fate would be even more tragic than most when they lost.

“Okay, clear! Watch out for any remaining wires and get the Princess into the cockpit!!”

“Heivia, I found an ultrasonic wave marker on one of the corpses. See that band wrapped around the upper arm? It’s just like the mosquito noise devices hanging under the eaves at a convenience store.”

“Quenser, pass one of those to me,” said the Princess. “Only the Information Alliance is wearing these things, right? I can scan the frequency and take out every last one of them with my anti-personnel laser planetarium.”

(Hmm, the Princess really is a warfighter. I guess she isn’t the type to shriek and

cling to my arm in a haunted house.)

Quenser kept that honest opinion to himself as he saw off the cutting-edge warrior girl with a grin. If he said anything to upset the Pilot Elite here, every last one of his allies was sure to punch him later on.

Once the Generation One was moving, the battle was as good as won.

Unlike the Generation Twos which were specialized for Object battles alone, the Baby Magnum was designed for battles with tanks, aircraft, and even infantry groups. Even inside that smokescreen, she could accurately determine who was an enemy and send a horizontal storm of laser beams their way.

A sizzling sound that could have come from a Chinese restaurant came from outside the hangar.

It was best not to think about what had just been vaporized.

“Oh, looks like the jamming’s gone.”

“The Princess probably blew up a work boat out at sea or an electronic warfare aircraft with a big plate on its back.”

And with the radios functioning again, they received a very welcome message from their commander.

“This is Frolaytia. Listen up, everyone!”

“This is sure to be some kind of hellish work. Quick, get the jamming back up!!”

“If she really wanted us to listen, she should show off those wonderful tits of hers.”

“Things have calmed down, but Katarina Martini is nowhere to be found. She may have already been killed, but begin a search under the assumption she has been recaptured. Check the straight-line path between this artificial volcano island and the Information Alliance maintenance fleet. The Princess has the advantage when it comes to speed, but she isn’t that dexterous. We need infantry to settle things after she’s held them up! And the more the better!!”

“What do we do, Heivia?”

“Nothing. We’ve already done our share of work today. It’s not like we get overtime pay, so I’m taking a dump and getting to sleep.”

“By the way,” continued Frolaytia. “The assembly point is this island and 200 nautical miles around it. If you wish to refuse this mission, please leave that area at once. Otherwise, you might just be stuck here with the rest of us.”

“What are you doing, Quenser!? We need to jump in the ocean immediately!!”

“There’s no way we can swim 200 nautical miles! We’d drown!!”

“Three, two, one, zero. Good, good. I am glad to see I have so many subordinates with such passion hidden in their hearts. Thank you very much! That was the deadline.”

“What the hell was that!? It’s just like a search engine or social network’s notification of a non-negotiable change to their user policy! And our lives are on the line here!!”

“She’s really figured out how to take advantage of us…”

Q. This work environment would never be allowed in a normal company, so why was it allowed here? A. Because this was not a normal company. That simple answer was the worst part about the military. They could not reject this mission no matter how much they complained, so the idiot duo left the Object maintenance area while listening to Frolaytia’s instructions.

The sea breeze was finally sweeping the pink smokescreen away, but the puddles leftover from the earlier rain were now discolored.

“They’re polluting the environment.”

“This war hasn’t gotten so bad we have to crawl around drinking from puddles.”

“And who’s gonna be breathing in the air after the hot sun evaporates those puddles?”

As they argued, the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes arrived at one of the hangars lined up alongside a makeshift runway. Something was being towed out of that large half-cylinder building.

“A Merman? That’s a marine rescue helicopter, not a war toy!”

“I really want to chew out whoever it was that named it Merman instead of Mermaid.”

Those unproductive idiots only complained no matter what they saw, but busty, silver-haired Frolaytia was waiting for them at the hangar.

“Wherever the enemy is headed, they’re a step ahead of us. We need speed to catch up and these are faster than a boat, so fly low and pursue any suspicious readings. If you want a gun emplacement at the side door, attach one DIY-style. You have 600 seconds!”

She clapped her hands in front of her extremely large chest and the potatoes all got to work. This was no time to be staring at those large and jiggly things. Not because they wanted to dutifully fulfill their orders, but because being too slow here would mean ending up on the front line with no protection.

“Outta the way! That .50 caliber heavy machinegun is mine!!”

“You just took twenty rockets, didn’t you!?”

“Fools. All those weapons will be useless without any power tools to attach them. Ee hee hee. I’ll grab them all for myself and trade them for the best gear…”

The Legitimacy Kingdom clearly had excess energy if they were fighting amongst themselves before heading out to battle. The arguments continued as the marine rescue helicopters of love and peace were covered in deadly weapons.

“Ah, no. I-I want some of that electronic warfare gear…”

“Here, Lilim! Take this motion sickness bag!”

“Oh, no. Has that set in!? Could you stop making that my defining trait!?”

“We’ll be traveling through the air, so make sure to bring lots of barf bags!!”

Quenser looked up after attaching a swiveling heavy machinegun that stuck out of the side door.

“Hey, Myonri, do we really need to paint a face on the front of the helicopter?”

“It looked like it could really use some paint.”

They were apparently in the same group again.

Once the promised 600 seconds had passed, Frolaytia clapped once more and Quenser’s group climbed aboard the large helicopter that had a main rotor in the front and back.

It was finally time to head out.

With Myonri at the controls, the Merman held Quenser, Heivia, and six other

soldiers in its cargo space. Because it was originally meant for marine rescues, the wall was covered in a variety of equipment like oxygen tanks, masks, underwater work tools, and even medical devices like an AED and packs of saline.

“You can tell this belonged to a rich guy. They have better medical equipment than we do in the military.”

“More importantly, help me drop this wireless sonobuoy, Quenser! There’s something wrong when a commoner is taking it easy and a noble is working up a sweat!!”

Heivia tossed what looked like a long narrow sandbag out the side door and he unfortunately did not possess a spirit of noblesse oblige.

A sonobuoy was like a large float that was dropped into the ocean so it could scatter the kind of active sonar used by submarines and send back data on any dangerous readings it found. If the Information Alliance was using a submarine after capturing Katarina Martini, this would tell them where it was.

“Do you really think we’ll find them? Even if we are on the shortest path between New Caribbean Island and their maintenance fleet.”

“There’s nowhere for them to hide above or below the water. If we watch from above and drop sonobuoys, they’re trapped. If only it wasn’t a black-hearted old woman we were rescuing. But she’s the only one with info on Piranirie, so we have no choice!”

The 50m Baby Magnum passed by directly below the helicopters.

The top speed of a helicopter was said to be between 300 and 400kph, but an Object could easily exceed 500. The sight of the colossal weapon easily passing the aircraft had enough of an impact to feel completely surreal.

A powerful gust of wind shook the helicopter up and down.

“Kyah!?”

“Princess, I know you want to show off, but tone it down a bit!!”

However, the Baby Magnum did not seem to care.

In fact…

“But you would be in trouble if I didn’t move out ahead.”

It slowly dawned on them what she meant by that.

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

“If the Objects on both sides are working, that means the Information Alliance Nitrogen Mirage can join the battle too, doesn’t it? So wouldn’t this area be ruled by its anti-air lasers and their perfect accuracy…?”

“C-curse that busty commander… She stuffed these flying piñatas with as much living meat as she could!”

A bluish-white beam shot right past the large helicopter.

It probably had not been aimed at them. If it had, they would have been vaporized. It was only a warning shot directed at the Baby Magnum.

But a hit from a stray shot would leave them just as dead.

Also, they had to get to work before they really were the enemy’s target.

“Myonri! Move down as close to the ocean as you can manage!!”

“If we move below 50 meters, we might end up in the Baby Magnum’s path,” said Myonri.

“Are you dumb, Quenser?” added Heivia. “This is about to become a boxing match between Objects. If the Princess’s giant ass hits us during her dance, we’ll be sent straight to heaven!!”

Another laser fried the air right next to their helicopter.

But this one *did not* come from the Nitrogen Mirage.

“Grab whoever said I have a ‘giant ass’ and hang them out the side door. Let’s play a game of William Tell, Heivia.”

“She already knows it was me!?”

But this was no time to be messing around.

Quenser shouted over the roar of the rotors.

“Our options are the Nitrogen Mirage’s anti-air lasers which can shoot us down with perfect accuracy, or an accidental megaton butt slam. Our odds of survival are higher if we stay low. So, Myonri, just take us right down to the ocean!!”

"…Again, Heivia…?" said the Princess.

"Wait, wait, wait! It wasn't even me this time!"

As Heivia paled, the large Merman quickly dropped down. And just as it began racing forward as if pushing down the waves, a beam of light flashed by overhead.

It was as bright as welding light and nearly blinded them. Another Merman that failed to escape in time was vaporized.

"Dammit, one down!!"

"Its nitrogen laser uses artificial mirages to bend any way it wants… Keeping our head down isn't enough to avoid it."

"I won't give it time to do that."

The Baby Magnum moved further forward and began a serious shootout with the Nitrogen Mirage.

That bought them some time, but it was not an absolute assurance of safety.

Quenser grabbed at the shaking helicopter's wall and checked through the marine rescue equipment there.

"What are you doing, Quenser!?"

"It's creating artificial mirages by producing extreme temperature differences in the air and it's using those mirages as a prism to bend its ultraviolet nitrogen lasers." The student found a monstrous container of cooling spray. "But the Nitrogen Mirage isn't the only one that can do that. We know its trick, so we can create mirages too!!"

He sprayed a white smoke out the open side door like he was using a fire extinguisher.

Immediately afterwards, they saw a bluish-white beams bend every which way, arrive right in front of them, and then bend toward empty air.

"That was close!"

"We can only see the afterimage, right? This is like unwittingly crossing a minefield and only later learning how lucky you were…"

The other helicopters that had escaped to extreme low altitude must have

reached the same answer as Quenser because a few of them were trailing what looked like white smoke.

But then a bluish-white laser punched right through one of the helicopters flying alongside them.

“Wait, what!?”

“We aren’t calculating this out using meteorological radars or computers, so we can’t make perfect mirages!!”

The Princess seemed to have the upper hand, but she apparently could not destroy the Nitrogen Mirage right away.

They would be targeted in midair at this rate.

Once the tension in the helicopter changed to fear, they quickly made up their minds.

“Grab oxygen tanks and masks! And check how many underwater motor-controlled aqua scooters there are!!”

Quenser continued to scatter the cooling carbon dioxide out the side door while Heivia tossed a small oxygen tank and mask toward the cockpit.

It was time.

“Jump out!! We’ll be shot down!!”

Heivia grabbed Quenser’s shoulder and jumped out the side door.

Before they even hit the water, a bluish-white laser tore straight through the large marine rescue helicopter.

Part 12

The Nitrogen Mirage’s anti-air lasers were absolute.

Since they would have been slaughtered above water, Quenser and the other survivors fled into the ocean.

However…

(This won't last forever.)

Quenser added an attachment to his radio, attached the wireless mic to his throat, and covered his mouth with the mask he had been given.

The problem was the size of the oxygen tank.

It was small enough that Heivia had been able to throw it by hand.

(No matter how much we conserve, I doubt this will last even an hour.)

And just as he thought that, Heivia grabbed his shoulder. When he looked in the direction his awful friend pointed, he realized a shelf of the ocean bottom was quite nearby. The depth here was apparently much shallower than where they had picked up that submarine.

But that was not the real problem.

"A sunken ship?"

A giant rusted ship was rolled over on its side. Even from here, they could see it had become a fish reef covered in seaweed and surrounded by hundreds or thousands of small fish.

Radio signals did not travel through the ocean well, but that was not an issue when they were right next to each other.

"No, not that. You see those things attached with wires? Those are Information Alliance luxury cars in the parking lot. Those are their submersibles."

Something was wrong with the flow of time.

Those "new products" seemed as out of place as something in a doctored ghost photograph and they never would have ended up here for no reason.

"That's the Information Alliance that fled from New Caribbean Island? Are they holding Katarina Martini there?"

"How did we end up on an ocean mission with no swimsuits and some old woman? After this is over, I'm gonna demand worker's comp from that busty commander. I'll have her personally make up for the lack of swimsuits."

The Nitrogen Mirage may have made an appearance because the diver team had

sent out a distress signal when they found themselves pinned below water and unable to move. They had been sitting tight until their Second Generation eliminated the Object and helicopter unit.

“…That leaves one conclusion.”

“They might have enough air in there to wait around for quite a while. Attacking them would be worth it.”

When Heivia gestured with his thumb, Myonri and the others showed their agreement by beginning to move.

As usual, this was a fight over resources.

Swimming was difficult without dedicated flippers or a lead diving belt, but they still managed a gradual approach. Before long, it grew more obvious that the 100m ship on the ocean floor was actually a transport ship. And not a civilian one. The giant communication antenna and crane-like refueling arm suggested it was a military supply transport ship.

The rusted walls appeared to be broken through in several places, so they thought getting in would be easy.

But just as they were within arm’s reach of the brown rusted ship, they heard some odd noises and several straight lines of air bubbles approached them like white spears.

The confusion reached Quenser’s mind before the fear.

“Eh?”

“Watch out!!”

But after Heivia shoved him behind some rocks and those rocks were torn away, the situation finally hit home.

“U-underwater rifles!? They’re shooting at us!!”

There were a few different ways of creating underwater firearms, but based on the rapid-fire speed seen here, these were likely based on assault rifles. The water would sap their momentum and the ballistic path was anything but stable after only 100 meters, but that did not overturn the Information Alliance’s advantage here. Having fireable guns was enough.

“We don’t have any underwater firearms!” said Myonri. “What do we do!?”

“Damn, where are they? I didn’t see any air bubbles from an oxygen tank…”

“Go back to the basics, Quenser. You just have to determine the distance and angle from the bullet holes.”

Heivia pointed to where the gunfire had come from.

4 o’clock and 9 o’clock.

As things were, this could develop into an inescapable crossfire.

“We’ll be slaughtered before we can do anything…”

“We just have to wipe them out without firing a single bullet. What do we have at our disposal? Knives, a gas-operated pile driver…”

(The current is…what do you call it with water? Anyway, it’s like a tailwind from us to them. And I know I saw seaweed torn like this and a crab shell crushed like this in a documentary. If I can just find something to use for bait…)

As he gave this serious thought, Quenser casually reached a hand toward Myonri’s small butt.

“Eek!?”

The maiden jumped straight up because she had been completely focused on the enemy in this tense situation, but all Quenser wanted at the moment was her large combat knife. After rudely swiping it from someone else’s sheath, he used the thick blade to pry off the univalves attached to the rocks they were using as a shield.

As the many shells followed the currents and flowed out in every direction, something happened.

The Information Alliance soldiers were gradually taking up position for a crossfire, but then something like a giant blanket dropped down on them from above.

No.

“That’s a giant squid!! This is pretty shallow for one of them, but you can still find them around!!”

“You look pretty proud of yourself, but don’t think I’m ever forgetting what you did!!” protested Myonri.

When their tentacles were extended from their body, they were more than 15 meters long, making them big enough to capsize a small fishing boat when caught in the boat's net. Once captured by one's countless suckers, human strength was not enough to break free.

With the 4 o'clock group eliminated, the enemy could no longer complete their inescapable crossfire.

"You bastards!!"

Heivia leaned out from the rocks and aimed something at the panicking Information Alliance soldiers to 9 o'clock. It was not a gun, but it looked similar. It was a gas-operated underwater pile driver he must have found in the naval rescue helicopter.

It was meant to drive stainless steel hooks into rock so they could support work wires, so it would not function as a projectile weapon. It was even more doubtful it would reach the enemy soldiers with the great resistance of the water.

But its lethality was fairly irrelevant.

Just like the previous univalves, he just had to fire it in their general direction.

Squids and octopuses tended to chase after shiny things.

And that infinitely increased the value of a light. Holding a light source was dangerous, but having it reflect wildly was even more effective.

"…!?"

"!!"

The merciless ocean did not even allow them to cry out in death. Having spotted a new toy, the giant squid charged toward the soldiers to grab them along with the jewel it wanted to claim as its own.

Flavor, smell, and light could all become life-protecting weapons. Bullets were not everything.

Thanks to that, some of the soldiers were discarded once the giant squid grew tired of them. But…

"What? They're holding their throats and writhing around."

"Since we didn't see any air bubbles from an oxygen tank, they're probably using

a caustic soda circulation system. The carbon dioxide from their breath is absorbed so they can reuse that air, but if it gets punctured and water contacts the chemical, it produces toxic gas. …Then they've built themselves the world's smallest gas chamber. It's a good candidate for one of the worst ways to die."

"Ehh? I thought the worst was the steamroller???"

"You mean getting crushed by your own side's Object in the safe maintenance area? But I've also heard of a Pilot Elite fighting motion sickness during a long mission and ultimately foaming at the mouth from the pathogens coming from their own barf bag."

"Ah ha ha!"

"Wa ha ha!!"

"Uehhh…" groaned well-behaved Myonri as she listened in and grew pale.

Nevertheless, they had a chance now that they had driven the capricious giant squid toward the Information Alliance soldiers. While shining their handheld lights on the distant pieces of metal, Quenser's group left the rocks and approached the rusted supply transport ship.

"Oh, looks like the others on the helicopters spotted this ship."

"…Isn't this way too few to be all of them?"

While praying that everyone else was working toward some other means of survival, Quenser's group dove into a split in the supply transport ship that was as beat-up as an empty can chewed on by a fierce dog.

"This is a waterproof door."

"Opening it won't cause seawater to pour in, will it?"

"It's marked as an airlock. It's meant for marine rescues, so it should be fine."

Quenser turned the round handle in the center of the rusted door to open it. They found a small door inside. It was of course much darker inside than outside, so they would have to use their lights to continue any further. After entering and closing the door, they used a hand pump to remove the water from the room. Only then did they open the other door leading inside.

"Bwah! Finally, some air. Yes, we were born on earth, weren't we!?"

“This is a really strange sight, isn’t it?”

They immediately removed their masks to preserve as much oxygen as possible and they made sure to attach them at their hip instead of discarding them. The supply transport ship itself had rolled onto its side, so the position of the long corridor’s walls and floor had greatly changed. The doors lining the wall were now pitfalls, so it felt like wandering into a world of trick art.

And with air surrounding them, they could use their assault rifles and submachineguns again.

“Everyone, make sure you don’t have water in your gun’s combustible gas pathway. After checking on your partner, let’s head on in.”

That was when a dry bursting sound rang out down the corridor.

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance, but they could not see each other’s expression because they immediately shut off their lights.

“…Who was that?”

“It was pretty far away. I don’t think they were shooting at us.”

A second and third gunshot followed. Someone had clearly run across some kind of trouble. Even if this was a conflict between two groups of the cornered Information Alliance soldiers, Katarina Martini was with them. Quenser’s group had to check on the situation immediately.

They switched their lights back on and advanced across the dark and dangerous footing.

“Our feet could easily break through with all this rust, so be careful. Make sure you don’t step on any of the doors.”

“Do you think I’m an id-…hwah!?”

“You klutz!!”

Driven by the sudden fear of falling, Quenser searched for anything at all to grab onto and ended up wrapping his arms around Myonri’s hips, causing her to jump. In the darkness, his face was buried in a fairly scandalous place, but his life really was at risk.

“Phew. That was a close one. We really are at war here, aren’t we?”

"…You have no idea how much I want to 'accidentally' shoot you right now…"

Cute Myonri was tearful and trembling. The corridor was difficult to walk down with all the columns and pipes, but the sporadic gunfire came to a stop before long. The gunfire had squeezed their hearts with tension, but its absence brought an eerie sensation crawling up from the darkness.

"I don't like this smell…"

"…"

"This isn't all the rust everywhere. It's similar, but it's stronger."

The corridor led to a long, narrow stairway. And with the ship on its side, it was like a right angle turn. Heivia approached while on the lookout for an enemy attack and he peered up it with his light and gun both at the ready.

There was no reaction.

Puzzled by his awful friend's lack of movement, Quenser approached too.

Then the boy saw the scene past Heivia's shoulder.

So much red covered everything.

And a blonde girl in a black one-piece swimsuit stood calmly in the center of a pile of corpses.

Time stopped.

Heivia's light illuminated a group in thick rubber diving suits who lay unmoving with dark red holes in their foreheads or hearts. They were probably the Information Alliance surprise attack unit. Quenser and Heivia had no reason to sympathize with them after that group targeted their maintenance base, but that was not the issue.

What had Katarina Martini, leader of the genius girl project, feared?

The black swimsuit girl accompanied by a butler-like young man may have been the true threat.

She was Wraith Martini Vermouthspray, the Stopgap Grim Reaper.

Driven by fear, that amateur boy raised his voice without thinking.

“You…!!”

“Stop, Frank. There is no need to kill them. Not those honest perverts.”

“…Why a school swimsuit?”

“That’s your first question? This Island Nation legend’s aura is something else indeed.”

The young man took a step forward, but Wraith stopped him with a quick command.

What would have happened if she had not done that? It was not that she killed because she had a reason to. She did not spare them because she had no reason to. That was evident enough from the twenty-odd slaughtered soldiers.

But that was exactly why a question occurred to Quenser.

“…This isn’t…an indiscriminate…killing mode…?”

In her special black one-piece swimsuit, Wraith gave an exasperated snort and snapped her fingers, so the young man pulled something out of the pile of red corpses. No, some*one* who was desperately trying to blend in with the dead bodies.

It was Katarina Martini.

The instinct to immediately join the dead on the ground may have come from her experience surviving a harsher age.

“I don’t know what this cowardly defector was telling you, but, well, she’s the one we have business- kyah!?”

Then something strange happened.

Cool and composed Wraith suddenly stopped speaking and jumped in shock. Then she frantically grabbed a nearby sleeve.

She may have thought it belonged to the butler young man, but by some twist of fate it actually belonged to Quenser Barbotage.

“Wh-what is it!? Is the enemy targeting us from somewhere!?”

“Ahem. I-it’s nothing. There is no need to make such a big deal about-…”

“Heivia, Myonri, be on your guard! This was enough for *Wraith* to scream and jump. Something horrific must be lurking in the shadows!!”

“…wharf…on the…”

“What, what? Since this is the Information Alliance we’re talking about, is it an amphibious attack drone? You’ve gotta be kidding me. Their weapons can keep moving around after all the soldiers were killed?”

“I was afraid of a wharf roach crawling in the wall!!!!!”

Swimsuit Wraith could not bear it any long and raised her voice.

He did not understand.

“…After you created this sea of blood and mountain of corpses?”

“Alive or dead, humans are humans. But they’re different.”

Wraith blushed but refused to let go of Quenser’s sleeve as she got back on topic. Her eyes turned toward her objective.

That person was the only one the grim reaper had allowed to continue breathing in this red-stained world of stopped time.

“Katarina Martini.”

“…”

“You must have had a reason to request asylum now. What and how much do you know about the X Day our Information Alliance is facing?”

While supported by the young man, the elegant old woman remained seated and maintained her silence.

Wraith seemed to know more than Quenser and the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom. In fact, she was looking at it differently.

“What? She must have had a reason to request asylum now?”

“There has to be something that only Katarina can see. Let me ask you this instead: What would you think if an earthquake prediction expert suddenly abandoned their job and left on a trip?”

“Wait a second…”

“And what if that disaster was an artificial earthquake that could be reproduced by human hands? That would seem like more than just abandoning their duties, don’t you think?” Wraith did not even look back at Quenser. “I don’t know if you did it intentionally or if you discovered it by accident, but you know the exact date of X Day, don’t you? That’s why you frantically contacted the Capitalist Corporations, and then the Legitimacy Kingdom after that submarine screwed up. It was all so you could avoid the bog the Information Alliance is being thrown into.”

“…”

Katarina had yet to provide any kind of response.

Was she bound by direct fear, leaving her mind blank? Or was she afraid she would say something to hurt her case if she opened her mouth?

Either way, there was something to this. Something that only Katarina could see.

“What did you embed inside the Martini Series? What is the true identity of these ‘deviations’ in our heads?”

If necessary, she was willing to use special weapons and drugs.

And with those options on the table, Wraith’s raised voice may have been relatively calm and gentlemanly.

“Answer me, Katarina Martini! Why are the other Martinis plotting an attack on the center of the Information Alliance at Manhattan, New York!?”

Quenser thought he was choking.

He flapped his mouth for a bit before realizing that no sound was coming out.

“Man…hattan?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the Information Alliance home country! The very center of the Chesapeake District! If it falls to a military attack…!!”

“Yes!! One of the four legs supporting the table will break. Clean wars? The age of Objects? The other world powers won’t have time to take advantage of the chaos and rise to the top!! The world will collapse and enter an age engulfed in flames!!”

Quenser thought of Lady Monica who had lost her home after her family “collapsed”. Arriving at a new age did not necessarily mean a change for the better.

“I don’t understand it.” Wraith Martini Vermouthspray clenched her teeth. “It can’t be explained with any kind of economic advantage, but could we really produce enough hatred to want humanity to burn to the ground? After we’ve become partially embedded in the AI network administration system? What kind of bug remains in the Martini Series? And is it eating away at my own mind as well!? You created me, so tell me!!”

There was no response from the old woman.

Before she could give one, an electronic tone sounded from the radio on one of the corpses.

A radio signal could not reach this deep underwater, so the Information Alliance had likely placed a wired antenna buoy or something on the ocean surface. The communication infrastructure lived on even if its users did not.

“Ah, ah, ahh☆ Master 00 to Slave 21. The Legitimacy Kingdom helicopter unit has been destroyed. Their Generation One is persistent, but the Laser Beam 069 is falling back to draw it to another region of sea. How’s your oxygen supply? It’ll take a while longer to put together a recovery team, so preserve as much as possible with a proper breathing rhythm☆”

It was a young girl’s voice.

It contained something that gave away her youth, but Quenser and his group had also cheated. They had already heard this voice through the wharf roach spy robot they sent to the Flagship 019.

However, someone else spoke softly before the boy could.

It was Katarina, the old woman who had created all of them.

“That is Piranirie Martini Smoky. She is #7. Her administrative role is to smoothly restart work on the warfront when things have stalled due to the restrictions of various treaties, power balances, habitats of protected species, and so on. In other words, she oils the rusted gears and reignites any wars that have spontaneously come to a stop.”

“…”

This girl was from the same generation as Wraith.

Knowing that was enough to put a sharp look in the Martini girl’s eyes.

“Oh? No response. Hey!! …Did they run out of air and kick the bucket earlier than expected?”

In her school swimsuit, Wraith grabbed the radio in her small hand, took a breath, and started to speak.

“Slave 21 to Master 00. There is nothing to report here.”

“Ah ha ha. You’re missing the code word, whoever that is. But if you managed to get inside the sunken ship now, I’ve gotta praise your precision. Are you perhaps one of us?”

“This wasn’t as impressive as you make it out to be. A separate group made it here as well.”

“It doesn’t matter either way. You’re a step behind. In fact, I would say you’re about three days behind me. There’s nothing you can do to catch up now.”

“Why are you so intent on bringing ruin?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. That doesn’t follow at all. If you really are part of the Martini Series, you should know what this is: I’m not doing this because I have a reason to. I’m not sparing them because I have no reason to. That’s how we work, isn’t it?”

“Did you think you could pull this off by corrupting a local fleet out here? That’s an impressive level of foolishness. Do you have any idea how many cutting-edge Objects are protecting Manhattan!?”

“Nya ha ha ha ha!! …It’s that way of thinking that tells me you’re a step behind.”

That was when a dull tremor assaulted the sunken ship.

It had originally been a supply transport ship rolled on its side and it was just

sitting there on the unstable ocean floor. It was entirely possible something had coincidentally caused it to collapse and roll, but it was more likely this was no coincidence.

This was something much more ominous.

As Quenser's group shined their lights around, Piranirie's mockery slipped into their ears.

"There were some things I was hoping to discuss with Old Lady Katarina, but, well, if the alternative is having her taken in by the Legitimacy Kingdom or Capitalist Corporations, I should probably send her to oblivion even if it means losing a piece of the truth. What do you think, old lady?"

"What are you-?"

"Nowww, a question: How was the Legitimacy Kingdom's New Caribbean Island created? And are they the only ones capable of messing with submarine volcanoes???"

Another disconcerting tremor reached them.

"This is an artificial eruption!!" exclaimed Quenser. "They're using explosives or an Object's cannon to stimulate the buildup of magma on the ocean floor. At this rate, we'll be engulfed by the lava erupting up from below!!"

"Piranirie learned a great variety of techniques for restarting wars that had fallen to a standstill for any number of reasons. She must have learned how to redraw EEZs, territorial waters, and national borders using the appearance of volcanic islands."

"Just to be clear," said Piranirie herself. "You don't get to live happily ever after if you do manage to escape that sunken ship. This is covering a much, muuuuch wider area☆ Ah ha ha ha ha ha!!"

They had no time for this anymore.

Swimsuit Wraith threw aside the radio and lightly snapped her fingers.

"Frank."

That was apparently enough to convey her demand. The butler-like young man grabbed Katarina Martini's arm.

And Heivia finally recalled what their mission was.

“Ah, wait!!”

“I know you’re loath to part ways with such a kind young woman in a swimsuit, but don’t call out to me every time I take a step. I’m not telling you to leave me just yet. And this is no time to be arguing over who gets to take Katarina. If we want to survive, we’ll both be headed to the same place.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Since Quenser bothered to ask, the blonde girl in a black swimsuit must have decided he was willing to listen because she turned toward him instead.

“Several submarine volcanoes will soon be erupting in quick succession. We cannot stay in the ocean, but if we head to the surface, we will only fall victim to the Laser Beam 069…oh, excuse me. To use your adorably pathetic naming sense, that would be the Nitrogen Mirage. Or we could be crushed by the Legitimacy Kingdom Object’s butt.”

“…”

Quenser paled when he was confronted with those facts once more.

In some kind of habit, Wraith’s hand wandered through empty air like it was searching for a pen.

“Given the distance, escaping to your New Caribbean Island would be difficult. And in the worst case, the series of eruptions could propagate there as well.”

“Then what are we supposed to do…?”

“There is one safe zone. There is a single paradise in this world which will be unharmed by the submarine volcanoes and not fired on by the Second Generation acting as Piranirie’s puppet.” Wraith pointed straight up. “The Information Alliance maintenance fleet. I don’t know which ship Piranirie Martini Smoky is hitching a ride on, but if we join her there, the Object’s great firepower will actually work against her and she won’t be able to attack us.”

That was indeed closer than New Caribbean Island.

And a product of that genius girl project would not be dumb enough to place her own fleet in a position where the artificial eruptions and Object under her control would destroy it.

“Katarina, I would like to ask you, our designer,” said Wraith. “Which of those hundred-odd ships is she on?”

“The Flagship 019 in the center. There is no need to look out for trickery, so you can go with the obvious answer. There is no need to go through a profiling process; I made her to be that kind of person.”

Katarina made it sound obvious.

Did she not even need to flip through the pages of a file? It was possible she was imagining an isolated aspect of her mother instead of the individual girls.

However…

“Th-this is insane,” said Heivia. “Even war has rules. But this is what happens as soon as the Martini Series shows up. And now we’re supposed to enter their maintenance base zone!?”

“You can continue following your precious rules to the end if you like, you foolishly well-behaved swine. But anyone who wants a real shot at survival should focus on the number and capacity of the submersibles the Information Alliance divers used. …There might not be enough space for everyone.”

An especially powerful tremor shook the sunken ship.

They could not wait any longer.

Just as Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance and took off running, the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers followed suit. They shined their lights around while passing and being passed by each other and they even started grabbing at each other’s hair in a race for the submersibles.

“Wait a second! Is no one taking that old woman with them!?”

“Don’t ask me! If you care so much, Heivia, you go back for her!!”

Was the problem that she was not a cute girl? Or that she was not an adorable and kindly old woman with a round back?

And the idiots noticed something as soon as they arrived.

“Hey, there’s more than enough of these things.”

“Dammit. Manipulating the enemy with information is their specialty, isn’t it? She tricked us!!”

Nevertheless, they had no choice but to board them.

Wraith had stolen Katarina, the designer needed to predict Piranirie's actions, from right under their noses, but she would still have to escape to the same area of sea in some kind of vehicle if she was to survive. They could always stay right on that girl's ass and demand she come to a stop somewhere. Although they would have to use the Princess as a threat if these things had no weapons.

The submersibles looked like giant double-edged swords made of a chemical materials and Quenser's group split up between a few of them to leave the sunken ship.

A moment later, a large orange explosion erupted.

"Wahh!?"

"Are you kidding me!? That rusted ship suddenly split in two!!"

Once one point ruptured, it happened quickly. More and more large cracks ran through cold ocean floor and passed by the submersibles Quenser's group was riding. They even saw that fearsome giant squid fleeing like a puny fish. Soon after they saw an orange glow in the depths of the earth, the eruption shot up like a reverse guillotine.

"Surface, Myonri! Surface immediately!!"

"I'm trying! But there's something wrong with the rudder! Oh, no! We're going to roll over!!"

That was when they received a transmission over the submersible's communicator rather than their personal equipment.

"Ksshh!! Here is some advice in the hopes that the signal will reach through the ocean at this distance, my hard-working but foolish neighbors. During a submarine volcanic eruption, the obvious lava is accompanied by lots of nitrogen and carbon dioxide. If that dissolves in the seawater, it will create the carbonated water we all know and love. This will surround the submersible in air bubbles, making it difficult to steer, but it will also increase the buoyancy and lift the submersible more than you might expect. So be careful."

"Does she have to be so arrogant about everything!?"

"Oh, I get it. I had thought Wraith seemed awfully calm, but she reached that sunken ship with her own submersible."

"By the way," added Wraith. "While yours are specialized for covert movement, mine is loaded with four short-range torpedoes for self-protection. So try not to

anger me. That is rule one of survival."

The idiot duo felt their balls gently shrivel up.

"The maintenance fleet is 20 kilometers north-northwest of here. The carbonation should be affecting you right about now, but do not poke your head above the surface. Not only is this part of the migration course for those giant bluefin tuna, but the artificial eruption has those jewels of the sea in a panic. This is the one rare instance where their picket ships won't notice submersibles of this size in the ocean."

Not only did they have to worry about the erupting lava and volcanic rock, but they could also be hit by a tackle from a large panicked fish. While so many hazards just barely passed them by, Quenser and the other Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes made their way directly below the Information Alliance fleet.

"Piranirie is one thing," hesitantly began Heivia. "But why are the other soldiers going along with this reckless plan? Attacking Manhattan will only make their situation so much worse. It's horrific to contemplate, but they could even find their own families criticizing their actions."

"As part of the Martini Series, that point of view honestly irritates me to no end, but I am beautiful and generous enough to overlook it. Anyway, this may be a unique aspect of the Information Alliance. Did you know this? The more dedicated someone is to justice, the more diligently they will derail when they are led astray by sweet words."

"…Seriously…?"

"You couldn't work up the courage to stop the bullying? But you took a stand by never actually taking part? That's wrong. Dead wrong. Someone like that was simply pouring all their effort into pretending not to see it. No one was going to praise them for it, but they faithfully stuck with their decision to abandon the victims and prevent the bullying from coming to light. That is where bad deeds come from. It's someone careless who pulls the trigger, but it's the diligent ones that see it through to the end. That's why these things never end in a group. No matter how much they think something is wrong, they never speak up about it. If they did, they would cease to be their diligent self. And the masses have been quite thoroughly taught that their lives will fall apart and they will die if they cease to be diligent."

Using information to control the system was how the Information Alliance's pyramid structure worked.

They wanted a social structure where everyone thought they were free to choose what they wanted, but they were in fact manipulated into choosing what was convenient for someone else.

Just like how even the most niche book imaginable could be described as a best seller if you divided the genre down narrowly enough. And just like how you could manipulate the majority answer on a survey by selecting 1000 respondents from the slums or from the financial district.

When someone only tried to reach for what was popular, you could easily control them by selecting what was displayed as the word of the day.

And in the maintenance fleet built around the Flagship 019, Piranirie Martini Smoky had become the word of the day.

“I thought the Legitimacy Kingdom was bad, but I guess everywhere is hell.”

“We can at least promise you a ‘happy’ life,” said Wraith. “Because the masses are not even allowed to question their situation. And the administrator looking down at all of them and laughing? They have no idea someone is laughing at them in the same way. It just repeats like that, so I’m sure there’s someone laughing at me too.”

Meanwhile, the submarine volcanic eruptions began to weaken.

That was partially due to putting some distance between them and that hellish area of sea, but it had more to do with arriving at their destination coordinates.

An early-warning picket ship was directly above them.

And further in, they could see the gray bellies of the ships like a school of fat and round fish.

“Where’s the Flagship 019?”

“Check the propeller shapes, Myonri. You saw what it looked like when getting those spy robots on board, right?”

They saw the especially-large belly of the battlecruiser surrounded by several guard ships.

The small submersibles gradually approached and silently surfaced after confirming it was their target. Heivia grabbed some rope he had found in the submersible, opened the hatch, tied a special kind of knot on the end of the rope, and tossed it straight up.

After it attached to the railing, they began climbing up.

It was a climb of 8 or 9 meters, so it took less than a minute for those who were used to this sort of thing.

“M-Myonri, I’m not used to this kind of thing, so pull me up!”

“Why do I get the feeling you specifically chose me?”

Well-behaved Myonri tilted her head as she pulled up the skinny and unathletic boy. And no matter how much everything had been automated and digitized, there were still guards on the deck, so the rogues were quickly spotted.

It had already begun.

As they exchanged short bursts of gunfire, Heivia killed a few guards with his assault rifle.

“Dammit, they’re girls? A warship has a crew of about 200, right? That’s the same as a company. I really don’t want to fight a small war in this steel ghost house, so what are we supposed to do!?”

“That guard ship is going to respond before it comes to that!!”

After finally climbing over the railing like a stowaway, Quenser tried to flee inside the ship, but something odd happened first.

Close-in defense Gatling guns were installed at even intervals along the side of the battlecruiser like streetlights along a highway, but they all turned in unison like the fan section of a home appliance store.

With an explosive sound somewhat reminiscent of a broken buzzer, the horizontal rain released from the Flagship 019 tore apart the surface of the neighboring guard ship. No distinction was made between personnel and materiel. The sailors on the guard ship had raised their rifles without feeling very threatened themselves, but now they were utterly taken aback and fled inside the ship where the thick armor would protect them.

The electronic simulation division had finally made itself useful. (17-Year-Old ♀) Lilim Gazette (the Vomiter) gave a cruel smile and an OK sign with a mobile device in her other hand.

“Nee hee hee. They might have decent defenses against external cyber attacks, but it looks like they didn’t consider the possibility of an infection from inside. These might have been added later on because the close-in defense Gatling guns

and missiles are connected just like IoT appliances. Although for the ship's guns and missiles that are used for offense instead of close-in defense, it looks like we would need to directly visit the CIC."

However, the idiots could not hear a word she said thanks to the great din.

"…what…you…!?"

"…punch that smug…off your face…so get inside!!"

"…boobs…!!"

They could have sworn they heard a shocking word from Myonri in the middle of it all, but all the noise left the details unclear. They might have misheard, but they might not have.

Since this could easily deafen them or get them hit by a stray bullet, Quenser and the others opened a watertight door and ran inside the ship.

They did not have time to catch their breath.

They heard pounding footsteps and then some female soldiers in sailor uniforms appeared from around a corner in the surprisingly narrow corridor.

"Shit!!"

Fortunately, thick watertight doors were prepared all over the place to prevent flooding. Heivia and the others opened doors to random cabins and used them as shield as they returned fire.

But…

"Watch out! What is this? There are sparks everywhere!? Are the bullets ricocheting all over the place!?"

"Here comes a shotgun!"

"Ahhh!!"

With the complex layout and the walls and doors made of thick steel, the advantages of an assault rifle were mostly negated. Their range did not matter and they could not penetrate the walls or doors. That meant a short-range but powerful shotgun was the better choice.

At this rate, the enemy would move in and do major damage, but that was not

what happened.

For one thing, why were the armed sailor uniform girls exposing themselves to direct fire instead of holding a position at the corner?

Gunshots rang out from a different direction entirely.

It was the same sound they had heard in that sunken ship. And it came from beyond the corner the sailor uniform soldiers had come from. They had not come to attack; they had been on the run.

“Urp. I really hate seeing girls die…”

“What the hell…? Whatever-that-is is punching through the walls our assault rifles couldn’t get through.”

One by one, the sailors were picked off.

And then the culprits stepped out from around the corridor. It was Wraith in her black uniform and the butler-like young man. Black-uniformed Wraith held a small handgun in her right hand and Frank held something like a revolving grenade launcher with a shortened barrel.

But Quenser ignored that and shouted about something else.

“What, is school swimsuit time over already!? Why did you change!?”

“This is my proper uniform. …And don’t be so blatantly disappointed. It makes me feel like I did something wrong. Am I just too sexy? Is that it? Then I have no choice but to wear it again for you sometime.” Wraith shook her head in exasperation. “Regardless, you are late, Legitimacy Kingdom. Surely you aren’t going to say you will only put in as much work as you are being paid for.”

“Are you kidding? Did you use that grenade launcher to get through the wall? I didn’t see any explosions.”

“You are astonishingly dumb. It is admittedly based on a grenade launcher, but the barrel was replaced with one of tungsten steel and it fires lead bullets that fit perfectly inside. You could call it the world’s most powerful magnum.”

An anti-materiel rifle would be 12.7mm while a grenade launcher would be 40mm, so considering both the caliber and the overall mass, the weight of the lead bullet and the amount of powder would be Quenser gave up trying to calculate it and just smiled. Finding the answer would be a bad idea. He would only feel his balls shrivel up again.

(The little Martini tends to gather all the attention, but that handsome guy is a monster in his own right. Oh, but if he relies on that one trick, maybe he's more like me. If he doesn't have the fundamentals down like Heivia does, he might be going for a powerful impact that prevents anyone from noticing how little he can really do.)

It was theoretically possible to refer to the old woman as "little Martini" as well, but Katarina was still being held by the young man. He had to be able to provide as much force as a vise if he needed to, so she would be more secure there than in handcuffs. And even if nothing had been done to her, she might have gone limp from exposure to the loud gunfire in this enclosed space.

"We will now secure this ship and settle things with Piranirie."

"Will you be okay, Wraith? We've seen rats and wharf roaches on this ship. And all I can do is hold you, pat your head, and call you a good girl."

"Try to hold that over me again and I will tear off your limbs and pull out your entrails!!"

As Wraith blushed and shouted back at him, elderly Katarina calmly began to speak.

"Settle this? Given #7's structure, she will be in control of the bridge or the combat command. In other words, the most secure control point."

"Isn't this what you wanted, designer? There are more than 200 sailors on this ship. That's the size of a small company, but you needn't be afraid."

"Huh? Why not?"

Heivia looked skeptical, so Wraith explained while toying with her blonde hair.

"The toxic atmosphere running rampant in this maintenance fleet is coming from Piranirie Martini Smoky, the symbol of an administrative system. But now I have arrived as another Martini and a troubleshooter. By introducing a new order and providing a second control tower, her unilateral control can be fairly easily shaken. Think of it like the class bullies being surrounded by their target's colleagues at work and the rest of the class seeing it." Wraith tossed Quenser a roll of sticky tape. "If they surrender, bind and gag them. If they don't, kill them. I have no obligation to worry about the sailors, but as an Information Alliance officer, I will remind you that it can be tempting indeed to know that surrendering gives you a chance at survival. And this is not just some ideal. I have the experience to back it up."

“In other words, this is the perfect chance to legally tie up some sailor uniform girls. (Grin)”

“What part of this looks even remotely legal?”

The discussion was over.

No matter how formidable a foe the Nitrogen Mirage was, the chaos would end if they could stop Piranirie who had sent the entire maintenance fleet out of control in the first place.

“Oh, right. Wraith, you might see what look like squished wharf roaches, but don’t worry. Those are probably the remains of our spy robots. But if you are scared, feel free to grab onto me. I can even carry you around and toss you in the air for fun.”

“I warned you, didn’t I? Now tell me what it was I said I would do to you.”

Just then, Quenser happened to look out a window.

A bluish-white nitrogen laser scorched the air and mercilessly tore away the Flagship 019’s bridge.

Part 13

There was noise.

That noise arrived at the resolution of a problem and became an unnecessary hurdle of its own.

“Are you insane, Lieutenant Colonel!? You’re stimulating submarine volcanoes across the naval battlefield without confirming the death of your allies first!! Listen, just because they are marked ‘missing’ on the paperwork does not mean they are considered dead like they are after cardiopulmonary arrest. Do not forget that my men could be deemed killed by your friendly fire if their corpses are found within the cooled lava!!”

“Also, the sea around New Caribbean Island is considered internationally

protected waters to recover the marine resource of bluefin tuna. We might be able to fight back when the Legitimacy Kingdom sends a maintenance base and Object there on the pretext of protecting that area, but we cannot directly attack the environment there. We have a reputation to maintain."

"Are you sure you did not misinterpret this? We put you in charge a simple operation in this delicate region of sea, not an all-out attack! For one thing, I am the fleet commander!! You are merely a guest providing external advice, so when did you gain the authority to boss my men around!?"

"I will be reporting this to our superiors."

"I am sure the top brass enjoying the Manhattan scenery will be shocked to hear this! I don't know what this genius girl project is about, but if there are thousands of you, then you are easily replaceable. Do not think you will be protected by your privileged position forever! I will show you your actions have consequences!!"

There was only one answer.

The details were more complicated, but the genius girl project had been meant to provide answers that the stagnant system built by adults could never find.

In a way, she remained true to that.

"Hmm, I guess these people are getting 'rusty' too."

Part 14

The single blast violently shook the 200m battlecruiser and Quenser's group could not stay on their feet. The bridge, which was located a bit to starboard, took a direct hit and the ship as a whole twisted. The walls and pipes that could not stand the stress burst one after another.

"Oh, no. The pipes are bursting! The red ones carry steam, so make sure you don't get scalded!!"

“Wraith, why did you bring that old woman here!?”

“Are you suggesting I should have left her in the submersible? That is an impressively meaningless philanthropic spirit. I will only follow humanitarianism for as long as it is useful to me.”

“Ding dong ding donnnng.”

Then someone made an obvious call for attention over the ship’s speakers.

The surrounding sailors would hear this too, but the girl did not seem to care any longer.

“I can make a pretty good guess based on the chaos in the ship. It’s another Martini who’s boarded us, isn’t it? Well, I guess you had no other way of surviving that situation, did you?”

“Is she crazy? She shot her own ship with her own Object!?”

“It’s a very Martini Series kind of thing to do.”

What they said here should not have reached her, but she may have predicted their question.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. The Laser Beam 069’s precision is quite something, so it can whittle away at the ship with its nitrogen lasers without actually sinking the ship. When I solve a problem, I rid myself of every hindrance in order of severity. And that applies to the enemies that have infiltrated the Flagship 019, the senile old man restricting my authority here, and the defeatists who gave up fighting and neutralized themselves.”

“Not good! Get away from the windows!!”

Another fearsome beam of light struck the battlecruiser from the side. The bright light blinded Quenser’s group, but it had not hit where they were. Had it vaporized another Legitimacy Kingdom unit that had boarded elsewhere, or some Information Alliance sailor uniform girls who had tried to climb over the railing and jump into the sea?

With the young man protecting her, Wraith held her mobile device’s microphone to her mouth. She was probably disguising the route taken as she used her Information Alliance officer privileges to access the ship’s broadcast system.

“I am Wraith Martini Vermouthspray. I specialize in troubleshooting. Attention everyone!! Piranirie is attempting to bind her allies with fear. She killed the

captain in order to leave all authority with herself, so don't be shaken by her sweet words or threats! None of you will need a court martial given the situation!!"

"Nyaaa ha ha!! I was trying to show some respect to a fellow Martini, but what's this? It's only #49? Damn that's low. Can you actually hear me? Oh, and watch out for sudden lightning strikes while you're moving around. And just to be clear, I'm one of the single digit successes of the genius girl project. I'm #7. Even if I can't see any silhouettes out the window, I can still mostly predict the movements of the game pieces. Ah ha ha ha ha!!"

"Sh-she's completely insane… There are pipes and firepower everywhere in here. She's on the same ship, so isn't she afraid of setting fire to the engine room or ammo!?"

Heivia was utterly shocked, but a contrasting voice spoke up in response.

"She is only putting on an act to make negotiation seem impossible. That way you think failing to unconditionally obey her means death. Piranirie's usual trick is to restrict the flow of people and information, divide up the battlefield, and then fill the atmosphere with panic. You could call it the necessary preparations before actually getting to work. …When my mother, Casandra, would target some food reserves, she started by inciting a riot in the surrounding area."

Katarina's gentle but blunt statement received a hostile glare from Wraith who had been built based on that woman and the girl's hand wandered through empty air as if in search of a pen.

"This changes the difficulty of achieving them, but it does not change our plans. With the bridge gone, Piranirie must be in the combat command. I doubt we can stop the Object's lasers without stopping her."

They began to move further into the ship.

And once they let their guard down even a little, female Information Alliance soldiers appeared from the cabin doors all around. After that broadcast and the Nitrogen Mirage's actions, their adoration of Piranirie had probably faded some.

But that did not matter.

"Prepare yourselves! Prepare for battle, everyone!!"

"Please no. We really are going to get shot. What happened to the clean wars? Why are we in danger here?"

“Shut up. If it looks like we aren’t going to fight, the Object will fire on us. And I don’t want to get vaporized because of you, so if you refuse to do this, I’m shooting you myself. So just get going!!”

Trapped by the fear of death, they attacked with looks on their faces no girl should ever let anyone see.

“Urp. Why are they all girls!? Please, I’m sick of this sailor uniform hell! When I said I wanted to slay 100 girls, I meant in bed!!”

“The gender bias is probably due to all the guys leaving and getting their asses kicked back when they attacked your island. So the world is cruelly fair in this case.”

Heivia, Myonri, and Wraith shot more and more of the Information Alliance sailors that pressed in at them. The ship’s crew could not take advantage of their normal potential even when they gathered greater numbers. That was because they had been ordered to make an immediate all-out attack instead of waiting for a better opportunity. Just as in poker and boxing, rushing right in every time would only get you badly beaten. It was a lot like firing at the paper targets moving along rails in a shooting range.

“Tch!”

Wraith clicked her tongue when she saw the sailor girls leave red paint-like marks on the walls as they collapsed to the floor. Of all things, she was crouching down and pulling out a tourniquet during this chaos.

“We don’t have time to get sidetracked! If we stop shooting them here, we’ll be pushed back!!”

“The rules of combat here are different. I will grow as coldhearted as necessary to stop this chaos, but that is not what is needed here. Piranirie’s threat didn’t make them betray us out of self-interest! They’ve been driven entirely beyond their own control, so they themselves are blamele-…!!”

Wraith was cut off by a gunshot.

A bullet from Heivia’s assault rifle had shot through the head of an injured soldier sitting on the floor. Blood mercilessly splattered across Wraith’s white cheek as she tried to keep her allied soldier alive.

She snapped back with the kind of pure emotion that was very unlike the Stopgap Grim Reaper.

“You bastard…!!”

“Look closer. She was holding her sidearm! It isn’t over until they’re dead and stopping before then will only get you shot at point-blank range!!”

The black-uniformed girl grimaced when faced with an unexpectedly good argument from that idiot.

Heivia had of course not wanted to bring that bloody flower to bloom.

Wraith was overwhelmed by the sight and was close to losing her will to fight, so the delinquent noble dragged her along. He continued the massacre parade, but he could be seen holding a hand to his mouth on occasion.

“Now this is a result-focused tragedy. Urp. I feel sick to the stomach.”

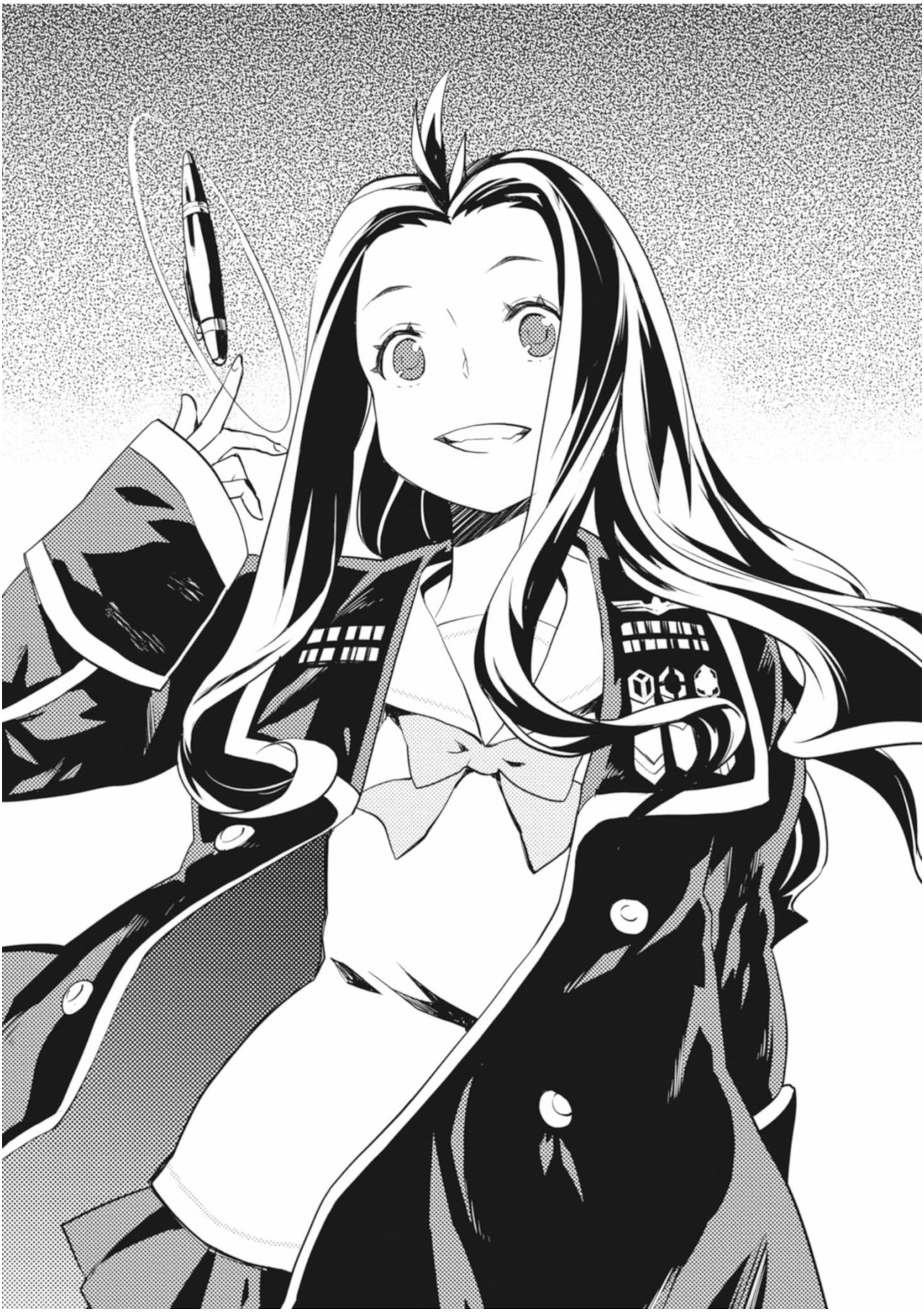
Heivia groaned and Wraith held her mobile device to her mouth.

Her own voice exploded from the ship’s speakers.

“Piranirie intends to use up all of the personnel and supplies she was given! Just like an officer who doesn’t want the higher ups to feel too comfortable and reduce their budget next year!! Do you really want to waste your lives like a frivolous road construction project at the end of the year!? Listen, Piranirie has already left the Information Alliance chain of command. Dutifully obeying her will only get you court martialed!!”

The gears of the all-out attack jammed slightly.

However…



“Ohh? Wraithy, do you want to hold a student council election on this sinking

ship? Well, a debate over the school broadcast system is fine by me."

"Everyone, get down!!"

A fearsome beam of light punched through the wall right in front of them.

It was not aimed at Quenser's group. It was clearly targeted elsewhere and the confused Information Alliance sailor uniform girls were vaporized along with the melted steel.

The ship-wide broadcast continued.

"Hey, #49. A democratic decision only really works when the people are at least guaranteed their lives. If you line them up and hold a gun to their heads, do you really think you can call that a proper decision or a free vote?"

"Piranirie!!"

"You too are just using up the soldiers like they're part of your paperwork. Okay, okayyy. Everyone, who do you think will win and survive this: #49 or #7? Those who side with the loser will of course be slaughtered, so make sure you fight good and hard☆ If you don't, I'll provide you with more motivation until you do. Don't worry. Truth can be twisted every which way. As long as there are no witnesses, that is."

She was being ridiculous.

But that ridiculousness once more changed things for the Information Alliance.

After rationally coming to a stop, those soldier girls despaired at the fact that ideals would not protect them and they resumed charging at the enemy.

"Yes, I've seen this before…"

"Quiet."

"It was the same when my mother stole baby food for me. She drove the starving people to action and kept them going by later informing them they would be slaughtered if they failed. And once they could not stop and began fighting for their lives, she used the chaos to ensure that only she could safely escape without being tracked."

"Shut your stinking mouth, you old hag!!"

Wraith snapped back as if in a fit of rage.

But there was no guarantee that every enemy would arrive from a distance.

While Heivia and Wraith used their assault rifle and handgun to push back the charge, a half-open watertight door slowly moved right next to them.

Frank noticed immediately and fired his cannon-like magnum into the cabin, but it did not end there. The enemy's blown-off arm flew through the air with a pin-less grenade still in its grasp.

"!?"

They only had 3 to 5 seconds.

If it detonated like this, everyone in the narrow corridor would be hit by the blast and fragments.

And it was obvious what Wraith Martini Vermouthspray intended when she immediately stepped forward instead of back.

But someone interfered before she could complete her action.

Before Wraith could cover the blast with her own body, Katarina kicked an opened door from where she had fallen to the floor. The movement of the door knocked the grenade into the cabin where it exploded inside the sealed metal box.

"Why did you save me? That was the perfect chance to have one less of the Martini Series you so despise."

"You have likely inherited the side of Casandra Martini that restored order and reconstructed a shelter to provide safe clothing, food, and water. But at the time, my mother was so focused on the overall threat that she was nearly stabbed by a robber who snuck up to her…"

"Not the point. If you know our weaknesses, you could have spread that information and let us die."

The old woman's expression crumpled at the girl's cold questioning.

"I knew that would the most efficient method. I of course knew what the best choice was."

Katarina looked like she could not believe what she had done.

She shut her eyes in the center of her wrinkled face.

“But once I saw you, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t say it was better for you to be dead.”

“…”

Wraith gave a quiet snort.

She did not have time to persistently ask what the woman meant. Even now, more and more Information Alliance girls, her supposed allies, were rushing in to shoot them in the back.

There was nothing but harsh gunfire and the colors red and black.

Wraith could not see them as an enemy to be defeated, so even now, she only attempted to neutralize them by aiming her handgun at their arms and legs. But Heivia followed through by firing right between their eyes or into their hearts.

The delinquent noble clicked his tongue and raised his voice.

“This is a waste of ammo! If you’re gonna do this, then do it right!!”

“~ ~ ~!!”

“If they can move a single finger, they can pull a trigger or a grenade’s pin. Our only option is to cross this minefield in front of us! Myonri, you too! Your submachinegun is firing low-caliber suppression rounds for a PDW, so firing at their arms and legs will still break bones and tear arteries! It won’t save them!!”

He was right. But to Quenser, who was irresponsibly avoiding the fight, it looked like Heivia and the others were being drawn into the atmosphere here. He felt like the baseline of morality only continued to drop on both sides of the battle.

This was Piranirie Martini Smoky.

This harshly colorful world had come from within her.

“Are the only options here the whip or the whip!?”

“Oh, honestly. This gun is too powerful… There are other operators in the CIC, aren’t there!? Why aren’t they trying to restrain that girl!?”

Wraith seemed to enjoy those sensible questions from Quenser and Myonri. They seemed to distance her from Piranirie’s extreme rationalism and Heivia’s competing logic.

“That’s obvious. In this colorful hell, Piranirie’s location is the only safe zone. If she dies, it’s all over. Even if she’s causing it all, who’s going to play the hero when it means giving up their own sanctuary?”

But the Information Alliance sailors were clinging to that false hope.

Which side did they most fear being killed by? Faced with that ridiculous choice, they continued rushing in with sweat covering their faces.

“I recognize this…”

“Did you glimpse your mother again?”

“No, this was in a research paper that Piranirie herself wrote. It was titled Free Control of Lifeforms Using External Stimuli. The actual paper was about putting rats in a steel maze and placing a burner below them until they reached the goal, but this is a similar concept.”

Quenser heard a quiet squeaking sound.

For this to happen now, it seemed like some kind of curse.

“…A rat?”

It had likely gotten onboard while the ship was at port. He recalled that one of the wharf roach spy robots had been destroyed by a rat.

And more than just the one rat was squeaking.

Several of them were staring out from the space between equipment.

Quenser felt a chill down his spine when he realized what that meant.

“Are they waiting for us to die and become meat for the taking?” asked Katarina.

“More importantly, are the Information Alliance sailors the only ones being monitored? If they have cameras on their uniforms or guns, we’re in trouble too! It’s about time for that goddamn Object to fire again!!”

“!!”

They had to have made it pretty far down in the ship, but they doubted the Nitrogen Mirage would care. Even if they were below the waterline, the Information Alliance could always shut all the surrounding watertight doors before firing the shot.

A thick beam of bluish-white light pierced the ship nearby and an entire group of hesitant Information Alliance sailors were annihilated.

“Dammit, that thing’s got complete control! What is our Princess doing!?”

“Let’s just pray she isn’t at the bottom of the ocean…wah!?”

Quenser’s group immediately ran into a large room.

They waited for a bit…but the nitrogen laser they were expecting never arrived.

A pause was not enough to relax. It felt like being given unexploded ordnance to hold instead of a body pillow. Where was the Nitrogen Mirage and was the Baby Magnum still safe? They knew the answers would not put their minds at ease, but the dearth of information still applied pressure on them from all sides.

“…? Are we safe here?”

“What is this place? A central computer room? There’s a huge-ass supercomputer here.”

“The Flagship 019 is an electronic information control ship, right? Piranirie must be plotting something for her attack on Manhattan. And I doubt it’s a way of directly sending in the Nitrogen Mirage. So she’s probably using this big computer to calculate out all the necessary conditions.”

“Since she is hesitant to fire on us here, you might be right.” Wraith joined the conversation while bashfully looking down at her mobile device. “Still, I doubt destroying this computer would be enough to stop her plan which is as foolish as it is ambitious.”

After overcoming that gruesome scene, even the Stopgap Grim Reaper may have been starving for contact with someone capable of a proper conversation.

“Why?”

“If that would be enough, she would be panicking and siccing those sailors on us.”

Wraith took a step in front of the young man and narrowed her eyes toward the machines beyond the reinforced glass that looked like large refrigerators.

“Anastasia, hm?”

“What? Did you give it a girl’s name like the Capitalist Corporations does with Objects?”

“It’s simpler than that. This is a DNA computer made using my biological mother’s cancer cells. Instead of using the normal system of 1s and 0s, it uses ATCG combinations to quickly compute complex calculations. When my biological mother learned how long she had to live, she agreed to be a specimen so she could offer something to the world.”

Was Wraith emphasizing the “biological” part because it reminded her of the time before she became a Martini? Or was it because Katarina was here?

If that woman had not died, it was possible Wraith’s last name would not have changed.

“You mean…?”

“Yes, no matter what form it takes, this is my biological mother. After all, the chromosome design was completely broken, so you just place it in a Petri dish and it multiples without end. The Anastasia Processor’s excellent results led to more and more production, so now there are apparently about 400 tons of her cells around the world.”

“I thought this was going to be a moving story, but you just had to give it that Information Alliance twist, didn’t you!?”

At any rate, this DNA computer may have been one of the reasons why Wraith Martini Vermouthspray had sought a place for herself in the genius girl project that filled the gaps in their AI culture. This way she could support what her biological mother had created.

“The question is what she’s using this Anastasia to calculate. It has to be something related to the attack on Manhattan.”

“Can you operate it?”

“Was your mother – our original – a cute technophobe who grew tearful trying to hook up a TV and DVR, designer? I am part of the Martini Series built into the giant administrative system to eliminate any unforeseen errors produced by machines like this one.”

A DNA computer sounded strange when you heard how it worked, but the console screen was the same as a normal computer. It felt weird that you only had to move the cursor to the icon and double click.

As Quenser watched over her small shoulder, he grimaced at the many windows she browsed through.

“Wait…”

“?”

“Yes, yes. This is bad. Heivia, do you remember the Nitrogen Mirage’s trick? It uses artificial mirages to bend its nitrogen lasers however it wants!”

“What does that matter at this point?”

“Did you ever wonder where the bent lasers went after they missed!?”

“Ah…???”

Heivia did not seem to get it, so Quenser reached for the console himself. Since he was standing behind short Wraith, he was practically leaning on top of her.

“This is serious… The drones are…yes, they’re flying. A water solvent, the first battle was several days ago, a girl’s name, a hurricane, the westerlies, ETA, meteorological weapon, and even the conditions needed for dissemination in the air! …You’ve gotta be kidding. This means that thing’s nitrogen lasers may have been no more than the primer. It’s electrolytic corrosion. They’ve been firing that big thing to hide their real goal. It was all so we wouldn’t notice they were using optical pumping for excitation of the energy…!!”

“H-hey, how about an actual explanation? Nn, don’t breathe in my ear!”

In a rare display, Little Wraithy blushed and struggled in vain while Frank the Butler expressionlessly exuded killer intent, but Quenser was too preoccupied to sniff the nice-smelling girl.

The wolf leaned on the girl with a serious look on his face.

“On the Central and South American line of the Atlantic, the westerlies head north. The giant hurricanes that appear here hit the east coast of North America, so you’re probably pretty familiar with that.”

“Y-yes. What about it…?”

Wraith asked while shrinking down and trembling like he was occasionally poking her side, so Quenser continued while focused on the screen.

“So a giant cloud that appears here will reach New York. Assuming you don’t have to worry about it maintaining a hurricane shape. Just like a meteorological weapon that messes with the upper atmosphere to alter the amount of rainfall, Piranirie has used this direct combat to mix a specific solvent into the clouds and

then excite them using the Object's lasers. This list here is the ingredients for the dye laser. But the dye laser itself uses water – in other words, the primary component of clouds – to amplify the energy."

"What does any of that matter? They're amplifying the electrical energy in the clouds? So are they going to trigger lightning strikes exactly where they want? Or are they going to use an EMP or something to damage the computers over a wide area? Nothing like that can bring down the world-renowned and shockingly well-protected Manhattan!"

"Sorry, but this is much worse than that."

While more or less embracing Wraith's slender shoulders from behind, Quenser placed his hand over her small hand and the console mouse she held. He began searching for and opening a few files.

"Are you familiar with electrolytic corrosion? When a massive amount of electricity flows into the ground from a giant factory or subway line, the ground and moisture function as an electrolytic solution and the buried metal and cables are corroded through electrolysis."

"Wait…"

"Yes. There are a few different conditions necessary for electrolytic corrosion, but only one of them is important here. When a thundercloud approaches, the electric charge in the ground shifts, as if dragged along by the cloud," explained Quenser. "If thunderclouds with more energy than any natural cloud could contain passed directly over a metropolis, it would cause extreme electrolytic corrosion. The underground power lines and communication cables, the foundations of the skyscrapers, the subway tunnels, the gas and water pipes, and everything else buried belowground would fall apart like someone dumped sulfuric acid on them. So if something like that passes over Manhattan…"

"The ground itself will grow soft and all the buildings will collapse…?"

"If the water flowing from the pipes is broken down, it will become a whole lot of oxygen and hydrogen. And when the gas pipes burst, it'll be more direct. In the worst case, the ground below Manhattan will become a giant bomb."

Of course, normal electrolytic corrosion would not cause anything like this. It would only cause the underground pipes to gradually rust over the years and decades.

That was why Piranirie Martini Smoky was not relying on "normal" thunderclouds.

She was using an accelerator pumped full of electricity to create something that did not exist in the natural world. She was using the immense power of an Object to invite in something too extraordinary to naturally exist.

With a tremor in her voice, Wraith once more brought her mobile device to her mouth.

“…What are you trying to do, Piranirie?”

This was beyond the point when she could convince anyone of anything, but she must have felt the need to ask anyway. Her own voice left the speakers across the ship.

“Why are you so intent on firing on the very center of the Information Alliance!?”

“Ohhh? What a strange thing to ask, Wraithy. As a troubleshooter, how many times have you executed one of our own people when they screw up? Y’know, a bullet through the back of a corrupt soldier’s head as they beg for their life.”

“Kh.”

While leaning over her from behind, Quenser thought he felt her firm shoulders shrink down a bit.

Was she afraid of someone knowing about that?

But who? Quenser’s group? Or Katarina?

Piranirie had replied over the ship-wide broadcast that was not encrypted and anyone could hear. She did not care who heard this. She was stubbornly doubling down here, but if handled correctly, could that give her a sharp-tongued charisma?

“We are spare personnel meant to use human ingenuity to make up for the vulnerabilities in Capulet, the administrative system forming the AI network at the foundation of our Objects. #49, you must be the type of person who will kill any number of people so long as it will preserve order on the battlefield. I am no different there. When various factors bring the warfront to a standstill, I apply some oil and reignite the fire. To keep war running on schedule.”

That was one of the two major families from Romeo and Juliet. Only the Legitimacy Kingdom would choose a name for having a noble ring to it, so why had they chosen that name? Quenser silently thought about that for a bit.

Meanwhile, Wraith groaned a question.

"…What are you talking about…?"

"New York is the center of the information world, but it is actually the world's most uncooperative city when it comes to information collection. The more information the people are in contact with, the greater their information literacy, so they aren't so easily fooled. They block facial recognition, they reject having their search history saved, they use a decoy server for the internet and email, they hide their IP, they prevent anyone from tapping into their mailbox, and some of them even have multiple social security numbers. But what does that look like to the AI network running everything? The answer is simple: it doesn't look like anything. It seems several Martinis have been sent in to fill in that electronic blind spot, but it would seem none of them were successful. Something which cannot be measured is determined not to exist, so Capulet has dropped New York a long way down the priority list."

"…"

"Yes, yes. Didn't this ship run into some trouble in the Asian…what was it? Oh, right. The Mekong District. I believe it was something about using the tanks' drive-by-light systems for civilian self-driving cars. That was apparently their last chance. If they could have sent those weapons on wheels through the streets and observed New York that way, they could have corrected for the error. But they apparently screwed that one up. And wasn't that what you wanted?"

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

They would not do anything different even if they could relive that part of their lives, but they had not known this was hidden behind the plot involving Dorothea Martini Naked. …Of course, this was a deeply hidden facet of the whole, so those greedy tank drivers probably had not thought it through that far.

"But in terms of production and consumption, New York is overwhelmingly on the consumption side. And when an error message reports that a supposedly empty ghost town is devouring more resources than anywhere else in Information Alliance territory, it doesn't seem strange at all the administration system would try to plug that hole."

"I'm impressed you could get things so backwards… The people of New York don't exist? Because they don't exist, there's no problem with attacking them? Have you completely forgotten why the Martini Series was given our special privileges!? Our entire purpose is to control things manually when the machines make this kind of mistake!!"

"Is it really? I have given myself the role of ensuring the AI network runs as

efficiently as possible. It is true Capulet made a mistake. But if that very mistake is a simulation of how to most efficiently bring prosperity to the whole of the Information Alliance, I will follow that detour."

"AI is not god, Piranirie."

"Of course not. That is why it must be supported by human hands. I must ensure that those myopic fools do not reject Capulet's answer as a mere mistake."

That was the end of it.

Piranirie may have had no real reason to offer up further information and Wraith may have realized nothing she said would get through to the other girl.

The small girl simply looked up toward heaven and groaned a question.

"…Has she abandoned her free will?"

"?"

"We are meant to fill the gaps in the AI network connecting the central servers of our safe countries, so our own opinions are constantly being pitted against Capulet, the administrative system that collects big data from billions of people. Which is right and which is wrong? …If you let it sweep you away, you end up like that. Island Nation *shogi* players will train using AI software, but they maintain indirect control because they can raise and lower its skill by tweaking the parameters. Piranirie has become a slave to the machine. She has accepted that things are much easier if you just ignore matters of good and evil."

She could not be the same as everyone else.

She could not face in the same direction and feel the same enthusiasm.

Not with the general population and not even with the rest of the Martini Series.

"The entire genius girl project was based on a woman who hid the fact that she was a rational killer…"

"What about it?"

The old woman seemed confused why Quenser was bringing this up now, so he spat out the rest.

"This problem is even more fundamental than that. I can't even imagine the kind of isolation that must be pressing in on Wraith, Piranirie, and the others from all

directions…”

Wraith gave a quiet snort.

Was she thankful that someone was worried for her, or did she feel ostracized for being written off as something that could not be understood? Quenser did not know.

No, that was the way it was for people in general. Of course you could not understand someone at a glance.

Far too much simple loyalty had been expected of the Martini Series.

“They’re thrown into situations that would break anyone and then criticized when they do break. How is that right? And the adults mass-produced thousands of these created geniuses so there were replacements when they broke.”

“Enough. …You are ridiculously kind-hearted.” Wraith cleared her throat. “We don’t know which cloud is the meteorological weapon which will trigger electrolytic corrosion, do we?”

“It might not be just one. Since their balloon bombs are reliant on the natural westerlies, they might have prepared a full barrage.”

“I would also like to know how much time until it arrives. That will change how we put together an evacuation plan or even a countermeasure in which we fire our own meteorological weapon to transform the weaponized cloud into harmless rain.”

In that case, what did they need to know in order to protect Manhattan?

How many weaponized clouds were there and where were they floating now?

There was only one accurate source for that information.

“Let’s get to the combat command. We can drag all of that out of Piranirie Martini Smoky.”

“Let’s get to the combat command. We can drag all of that out of Piranirie Martini Smoky.”

Part 15

Once they left the central computer room, they were again exposed to the threat of the Nitrogen Mirage. They could not predict when a nitrogen laser would blast right through the ship's walls.

The number of attacks from the Information Alliance troops seemed to have reduced quite a bit from before.

"What's this? Did she purge too many of them, so she doesn't have any pawns left?"

They heard the quiet squeaking of an animal.

"…"

"Don't look, old lady. It'll only be unpleasant."

Heivia and the others had already done a detailed search and Quenser made sure not to look in that direction. He could hear the sounds of small animals gathering around what was no more than meat. He could kind of tell why no one was left.

"I can imagine some of them couldn't continue on or turn back, so they ended up in a shootout with the commanding officer that ordered the attack…"

"A normal Martini wouldn't waste this many resources." Wraith quietly clenched her teeth as the silence enveloped her. "I refuse to accept that a normal Martini would have such an extreme disregard for human life…"

Wraith's role was the Stopgap Grim Reaper. When various factors had caused the chain of command to fail and a unit had been abandoned on the battlefield, she was sent in to prevent them from being destroyed before the next commander could arrive. At first glance, it looked like she was constantly watching losing battles and coldly ordering them around, but she was actually working to improve their situation and reduce the number of casualties. She could never bear Piranirie's method of wasting her allies' lives like machinegun bullets.

Had that Martini been broken by something inside her or from the external isolation?

Even if they knew the answer, she seemed beyond saving.

The ship was full of melted holes and seawater had flooded some places. While avoiding those areas, they made their way to their destination, mostly following Wraith's lead.

"There it is," said Myonri. "Is that the combat command?"

They approached a giant pair of double doors on the port side.

It bore no fancy decorations, but the walls and door were a lot thicker than elsewhere. The entire room was built to function as an emergency panic room.

They recalled that the destroyed bridge had been on the starboard side. This was not an aircraft carrier that needed space for a runway, so the positions may have been adjusted to balance the ship's weight.

"That's not a door we can pry open with a crowbar. And I'm too afraid of the ricochet to try to shoot it open with my rifle…"

As Heivia grumbled about the problem, Butler Frank casually raised his extra-large magnum created by modifying a revolving grenade launcher.

In the closed space, the cannon-like blast pounded on their eardrums and the lead mass the size of a drink can bounced around like a pinball.

While pathetically curled up on the floor like a pill bug, Heivia tearfully shouted at him.

"Are you trying to get us killed, you son of a bitch!?"

"It's no use, Heivia. He must be the kind of pervert who only responds to blonde little girls who will dominate him."

"Frank," quietly warned the blond girl. …Oh? Quenser had a feeling that extra-large magnum had been aimed his way.

But regardless, that monstrous magnum could blow a fist-sized hole in the average steel door, but the CIC's door only dented a little. This was not something they could open so easily.

But only a civilian would think that meant to give up. This just meant they had to try harder.

"Quenser, prepare some explosives. Check how many rods the door has and set up the explosives to break them all."

"…"

"Quenser?"

Heivia frowned when his awful friend did not answer.

Instead of reaching for his backpack, Quenser glanced in a completely different direction and spoke quietly.

“I get why the sailor uniform girls aren’t showing up. Even if I don’t want to think about the answer. But this isn’t right. It isn’t right for things to be going so smoothly.”

“Wait…”

“Why didn’t the Nitrogen Mirage fire even a single shot while we took such wide detours? Piranirie has no reason to hold back at this point. That means she wanted to attack but couldn’t. I’m sure part of it is the ship barely holding together when it’s so riddles with holes, but that’s only secondary. There’s a more direct reason.”

“What? That sounds good and all, but I don’t see how it helps us here.”

“Piranirie tracked the location of all the game pieces using the cameras on the soldiers. And that goes for both enemy and ally. With all the Information Alliance sailors gone, she no longer has our location as we move through the ship. And she can’t exactly fire at random when she’s on the ship too. All she can do is sit and wait. …Until now.”

Heivia finally arrived at the most basic of conclusions.

He followed Quenser’s gaze and saw what the boy was looking at.

A military shotgun with a small lens attached was unnaturally sitting on the floor.

Piranirie had known they would reach this goal line eventually, so she had made sure she would know when they arrived.

“It’s coming… The Nitrogen Mirage’s nitrogen laser is coming!!”

“Wait, we’ll be fine. We’re right in front of the CIC!! It’s always fired from the side of the ship, so if we stay by this door to port, Piranirie will be in the line of fire too. It can’t skewer the ship from the side, so we’re safe while we’re-…!!”

Quenser cut Heivia off with a weak shake of his head.

The boy pointed not to the side of the ship, but to the front.

When he spoke, it sounded like he desperately wanted someone to tell him he was wrong.

“This is a 200m mass of steel. A shot down the length of the battlecruiser will vaporize us while only grazing the combat command’s door.”

Part 16

“Hee hee.”

How many people remained on the ship outside of this box?

This box lined with computers and partitioned by clear acrylic panels may have been all that remained of the world. The operators were overcome by that delusion while they silently fulfilled their duties in a desperate attempt to avert their eyes from the reality pressing in on them.

Only the small ruler among them was laughing.

That girl with wavy black hair wore a blue and gold parade coat over a sailor uniform and the baggy sleeves hid all but her fingertips.

She was sitting in her seat with her slender legs resting on the console.

“Ah ha ha ha!! Hee hee ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

She had won.

It was over.

Piranirie Martini Smoky applauded her own results. With the number of movable pawns and mobile cameras reduced, she could no longer command an attack anywhere in the ship. But what did that matter? She only had to lay a trap at the one point she knew the intruders would go.

And they had fallen for it.

There was no way they could escape now. Their one hope of survival was entering the combat command and using Piranirie as a shield, but the walls and door were too thick for that. The door would not break from manpower and bullets and they would have to carefully calculate out how to break all of the rods if they wanted to use explosives. There was simply no way they could do that before the Laser Beam 069’s attack arrived.

“Farewell, my fellow Martini. This is just how life is.”

Her screen showed the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers rushing for the wall, but that was not going to open the CIC’s door.

But then a small warning icon appeared.

Piranirie used the fingertips poking out of her baggy sleeve to skillfully spin a fountain pen.

(The sprinklers?)

The area was already full of holes, but that should have actually prevented a fire from breaking out. Quite a lot of water was being meaninglessly scattered just 30 or 40 meters down a straight corridor from the CIC’s door.

It was partly to strike a good balance with damage control, but the sprinklers were relatively high cost equipment on a warship that even had to preserve toilet water. As long as there were no electronics with broken shielding in the area, it was better to pump in seawater. So why here and now? When Piranirie frowned and called up a diagram of the corridor in front of the combat command, a series of ominous data points appeared before her eyes.

There was something here. There had to be something to it.

A pipe extended from the wall. The pipe was colored red as a heat warning and it was actually a dedicated duct that traveled from the kitchen gas burners to the main funnel that carried exhaust from the engine.

What would happen if the sprinkler water hit that source of heat?

(It would produce a lot of steam…no, a temperature difference…)

“W-wait, Laster Beam 069!! Cease firing!! I repeat, cease firing…!!”

She was too late.

Piranirie Martini Smoky should have kept in mind one simple fact: lasers could bend.

And the conditions were more or less the same indoors as outdoors.

Part 17

It was more of a gamble than a split-second decision.

The only data in his mind was the general idea that light was bent from warm air to cold air.

“No hard feelings if anyone gets hit!!”

After noticing one pipe with a high temperature warning label, Quenser immediately activated the sprinkler linked up to the fire alarm, producing lots of white steam.

From there, it was a matter of seconds.

A massive beam wrapped in bluish-white approached from directly ahead.

No, it had to have already passed through by the time he saw it. Quenser and the others were only seeing the afterimage left from scorching the dust and moisture in the air.

But if they could see the afterimage of the laser beam after it passed through, then they could not have been vaporized.

“It…bent!?”

Just as Heivia shouted that, the destruction finally caught up.

After being diverted aside just before reaching them, the nitrogen laser had pierced the combat command right next to them. That was a solid box similar to a panic room and it clearly swelled out from within. The air inside must have explosively expanded. That wall would have been difficult to blow down with plastic explosives, but a force within the room tore through the wall and stabbed into the opposite wall.

“…Bh…!!!???”

“——————!!”

They could no longer hear their own shouting voices.

They feared they would never hear anything more than this ringing in their ears.

But they had survived.

They were actually able to feel fear again.

“Damn…it… I think I’m going to pay for life insurance from now on…”

“Look, things are pretty bad there too.”

The inside of the combat command was a complete mess.

The thick walls had been blown out or melted and the computers had all been blown away. The liquid splattered across the floor was probably the melted acrylic panels or glass.

Then there were the people.

“Wow. What is this? Every last operator is piled on top of each other. Can you really get people to work together so perfectly on the verge of death?”

Heivia groaned, but Wraith shook her head as if to cut him off.

“The odds are good Piranirie is at the bottom. They believed she was their ticket to safety. Since they couldn’t ensure their own lives if she died, they acted as meat cushions to protect her. Talk about getting the cart before the horse.”

“…”

Katarina viewed the scene with a difficult look on her face.

Things were just as bad as she had expected. But since she had acted to protect Wraith when it came down to it, could she really celebrate this attack on Piranirie?

Even if the outcome here could change the overall direction the Martini Series took.

And Quenser’s group had to ask her about the weaponized cloud attack on Manhattan.

Just then, a warning icon appeared on one of the few remaining monitors in the shredded and scorched CIC.

“This is bad,” muttered Wraith. “The Nitrogen Mirage isn’t stopping. This is displaying the predicted line of fire for that shockingly stupid Object’s main cannon, and it’s aimed right at this combat command!! If it fires now, there really

is no saving us!!”

“We’ll just have to do something about that,” said Quenser. “Myonri, check to see if Piranirie is hiding in that pile of corpses. If she’s breathing, treat her injuries! And Lilim! I need the help of the electronic simulation division! The external cases might have melted like cheese, but hook these computers together again and find a way to fire the ship’s guns. And if that Anastasia supercomputer in the central computer room is still functioning, connect it to this monitor!!”

“What good is moving a ship that’s as full of holes as Swiss cheese!? And a normal ship’s guns aren’t going to do anything to a nuke-resistant Object!!”

“I don’t need direct firepower. I’ll be doing the same thing as before.”

“?”

“Okay, they use heavy oil for the standard fire smokescreen. They scatter oil on the sea and ignite it to create the smokescreen. That gives us what we need.”

Wraith frowned.

“Are you trying to create another mirage using temperature differences? Their Pilot Elite has to be learning. It won’t be long before this doesn’t work anymore.”

“They’ll be worried about a mirage, yes. But that’s why the odds are good they’ll overlook a different method.”

“Quenser, the datalink is online! The aft main gun can still turn!!”

“Let Anastasia handle the calculations for auto-aiming. The first shot only needs to be a smokescreen. Fire!!”

The young man and Katarina immediately sheltered young Wraith.

Were they trying to protect her ears?

With an incredible tremor, the supposedly 70,000-ton ship definitely slid to the side.

Unlike a missile, unguided ship’s guns were exposed to a variety of influences: from the wind and the waves to the earth’s gravity and rotation. It was a very general form of attack that was meant to hit the enemy just 50 times when firing 100 times. The initial smokescreen was not just to blind the enemy. It was to check the margin of error between the ideal targeting and where the shell actually fell so corrections could be made before firing the next shell.

“Even with automatic loading, it would take too long to prepare a physical shell now!!”

“That’s not what I want.” Time seemed to flow differently for Quenser as he responded to Heivia’s flustered warning. “The Nitrogen Mirage creates artificial mirages by producing extreme temperature differences using liquid nitrogen or iron oxide and aluminum. And it uses those to bend its nitrogen laser main cannon however it likes.”

“Hm? What about it?”

“But what will happen if a heavy oil-based smokescreen shell is fired into that? The heavy oil is mixed with naphtha, a flammable substance that released a lot of hydrocarbons. That gives us dense nitrogen and hydrocarbons. Now, if a nitrogen laser, which is much further into the ultraviolet realm than natural light, hits that, it will produce a certain optical reaction. Anyone who lives in a safe country metropolis is probably familiar with it.” Quenser grinned. “Photochemical smog. That’s a prism that bends light with a refractive index entirely different to an artificial mirage and that Object won’t be expecting it at all.”

A fearsome light burst out.

But this was not a mere failure where the laser veered off in the wrong direction. The Anastasia DNA computer could perform complex calculations far faster than the old style of computer, so it had accurately lined the pieces up on the board.

The complex artificial mirages the Nitrogen Mirage had created itself revealed a new side to themselves. The powerful laser it had fired was bent again and again in ways the Object had not expected and it ultimately made a wide U-turn and returned right to its firer.

The Pilot Elite probably could not see it in the final moment.

There was no way to follow the nitrogen laser by eye when it moved at the speed of light.

“Is it…over?” hesitantly asked Heivia.

There was a large hole leading from the front of the ship. It looked like a dark tunnel to them and it gave them a view of a giant pillar of water in the distance.

After some time passed, an incredible tremor shook the already badly damaged Flagship 019. It creaked so much they were amazed it did not just break in half.

It really was over.

The Nitrogen Mirage had sunk into the sea and the resultant waves were crashing against the ship.

Meanwhile, Myonri had found someone within the fallen operators.

“H-here she is. She looks a lot different from the other operators and it’s the same girl we saw with the spy robot.”

Katarina confirmed it with a deep voice.

“That girl is #7, Piranirie Martini Smoky. She is definitely one of the mothers I created.”

“…Oh…”

While lying on her back, a crack seemed to form in the girl’s dried lips and her throat trembled.

She probably did not have long.

Quenser was not a medical expert, but he could somehow tell.

He saw Katarina bite her lip.

“Answer our questions.” Here, Wraith remained cold. “How many weaponized clouds are you using to attack Manhattan? Give me the full list. Your plan has failed.”

“Who…who do you think messed with my head?”

Piranirie’s eyes were unfocused, so were Wraith’s words really reaching her?

That Martini almost seemed to have a smile on her lips as she continued.

“I succumbed to the correctness of the Capulet administrative system in control of the Information Alliance. But in the end, what really was the Martini Series? I could have sworn Katarina Martini was to blame for all this. As our designer, I thought she had set the alarm clock and then tried to escape the Information Alliance on her own so she could safely watch the disaster she had started…”

“That is not what I was asking. Where are the excited clouds that will cause rapid electrolytic corrosion on a citywide scale!?”

“…But it wasn’t Katarina Martini…”

“Hey!!”

“Oh, I get it now. It didn’t have to be an internal culprit that drove the Martini Series berserk… That’s right. It was someone on the outside that did this to us. All so they could do critical damage to the Information Alliance as a whole…”

Their first aid would be too little too late.

Even if they applied a tourniquet over the wounds and injected saline into her veins to keep her blood pressure from dropping, her life would still be lost.

It seemed a dying person did not shut their eyes in the final moment like they did in dramas.

With her eyes still open, their faint focus faded and the girl uttered her final word.

“…Mom…”

That was all.

Piranirie Martini Smoky would never move again.

While applying pressure to her wounds, Myonri checked the girl’s pulse and then shook her head. Someone grabbed Myonri’s shoulder and pushed her aside.

“Kh.”

It was Katarina Martini.

She placed her hands on the girl’s shredded chest and pressed down with her own body weight. She did so rhythmically and forcefully. Then she pressed her mouth against the girl’s red-stained lips and breathed into them.

Again and again. Over and over.

Piranirie’s slight chest rose and fell, but that was not the product of her own will.

It was nothing more than her lungs mechanically inflating like a balloon as air was sent into them.

The old woman looked on the verge of tears.

“Katarina…”

“Just a little longer.”

“It’s no use. This is war.”

“I know this isn’t the right thing to do!! But just let me keep going a little longer!! Just a little longer!!”

When Myonri gently placed a hand on Katarina’s shoulder, it seemed to break something deep inside her. The old woman’s hands wandered aimlessly and then she buried her face in the girl’s unmoving chest. She shouted something no one could make out. Meanwhile, the air breathed into Piranirie left her mouth and her chest returned to its normal level.

Quenser had done this.

So everyone else could survive.

Katarina finally wiped the blood from her hands, reached for the girl’s opened eyelids, and shut them. Then she gently kissed her forehead.

“Rest now, sweet child.”

That may have been how her mother Cassandra had put her to bed. Regardless, the rampage of the Martini Series, the story of a single girl, had come to a close.

But what did this mean?

Just how many bomb clouds were on their way to Manhattan?

And who was this person who had driven the Martini Series berserk from outside the Information Alliance?

This was more than an internal conflict. Suspicions would fall on the Legitimacy Kingdom, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization.

“What do we do?” groaned Heivia. And his voice quickly rose to a shout. “Is this battle still not over!?”

Epilogue

A grim look covered Frolaytia Capistrano's face back at New Caribbean Island.

The formidable foe of the Nitrogen Mirage had been defeated and the Baby Magnum was safe. The maintenance fleet's shredded central command, the Flagship 019, would apparently sink in due time, but they had received the white flag signal from the second ship which was now in command.

And yet Frolaytia felt no cheer.

There was nothing cheerful about this.

"Manhattan has…vanished from the map…?"

The state of the world had greatly changed while they fought.

Enough so that it felt irresponsible fighting these silly wars out here.

The young female officer on her laptop screen read off the report while looking like she did not understand what it meant.

"It is unknown how the Information Alliance's turmoil will spread to international society as a whole. There is even a risk of the clean war concept collapsing. Major, please prepare for the possibility of unpredictable battles. Please ensure the Baby Magnum is thoroughly maintained."

"Understood, Captain." Frolaytia adjusted the long, skinny *kiseru* in her mouth. "But even after a logical explanation, it's still hard to believe."

"Yes. I have no idea what is going on either."

The special clouds riding the westerlies would attack New York along the same route as a hurricane. The excitation of an Object's main cannon laser would fill thunderclouds with more energy than any natural cloud. Once they moved out over land, they would cause an unbelievable level of electrolytic corrosion which destroyed all the pipes, foundations, frameworks, etc. in the ground and caused the skyscrapers to collapse. Based on Quenser and Heivia's report, that was the plan put together by the Information Alliance's Piranirie Martini Smoky.

But that was not what had actually happened.

“Manhattan has vanished from the map.” The Captain on the screen repeated herself as if to confirm something. “Jersey City and Brooklyn both moved aside as if clearing a path for Manhattan. We cannot possibly predict how many alterations they have made to New York as a whole.”

“…”

“The island of Manhattan has left its original coordinates and is moving through the northern Atlantic at a steady rate of 40 knots. It is unclear how many of the reported bomb clouds there are, but 34 such clouds have disappeared from the radar as they approach Manhattan. Yes, we can only conclude that Manhattan fired on them with a powerful cannon.”

All of it was utterly absurd, but they could not deny the data before them.

“Major, I find it hard to believe, but could this be…?”

This was the center of the Information Alliance home country.

It had the power to move on its own, it could fire a powerful cannon, and it had an energy source capable of powering both.

Frolaytia narrowed her eyes a bit at what that brought to mind.

The Information Alliance tried to use information to remain at the peak, but their greatest secret had just been revealed here.

The busty, silver-haired commander summed it up.

“The world’s largest Object.”

After saying that, Frolaytia shook her head.

This was on a ridiculous scale, but it was not completely without precedent.

History had proven what would happen here and that was why she questioned the Information Alliance’s sense.

(Even if it can move across the ocean, it’s still the same. Have they forgotten the fate of Asgard, that city of 5 million in the Northern Restricted Zone? They haven’t foolishly handed control over to a new generation, have they?)

“Let’s go over this one thing at a time.”

“Y-yes, Major.”

“This is more like a warship than anything. What we will tentatively call the Manhattan is an extraordinarily large Object and it used something to blow away the bomb clouds. You said there were 34 suspected clouds, didn’t you?”

“If the satellite information is accurate, Central Park split apart and something like a giant tower emerged at a diagonal angle. It is estimated to be nearly 4 kilometers in length. We suspect it is a railgun or coilgun that fires physical shells.”

That alone was extraordinary enough.

The scale was entirely different from the standard 50m Objects.

“The shells can’t be normal either. How were the 34 targets distributed?”

“They were spread out over a 150km square of the northern Atlantic.”

“So at the very least, this is something that can hit that wide an area with a single explosive blast. And the actual range might be even larger.”

“Th-that exceeds the limits of our existing weapons. In fact, it’s unclear if an Object’s main cannon or an old-fashioned MIRV would be able to spread definite destruction over that wide an area…”

“But the Manhattan has done it. Do not reject the data. Hopes will not turn aside shells.”

(The explosion covers a wide area, it takes 50 to 60 seconds to expand, it interferes with radio communications, radar, and radio telescopes, it causes changes in the upper atmosphere, and a strange aurora was seen, suggesting it affects the ionosphere or magnetosphere. It caused no damage to aircraft, but is that really true?)

Frolaytia adjusted her *kiseru* and her eyes wandered a bit.

She shifted her focus inward and used all of her knowledge and experience to search for phrases that explained the phenomenon before her eyes.

“It’s the reactor.”

“An Object’s reactor? But low-stability plasma cannons convert that energy into destructive power at the greatest possible efficiency and not even they can produce such a large-…”

“No,” cut in Frolaytia. “The Manhattan’s main cannon is probably a railgun. It

takes the coal-based chemical fuel used in the JPlevelMHD reactors, solidifies it into a pellet, and uses that extra-large barrel to fire that into the sky above the target coordinates. After, of course, processing it so it can be fired by a railgun."

"Wha-…?"

"It probably then fires a powerful laser beam on the fuel to trigger a rapid reaction. The target will probably be beyond the horizon, but we just saw more than we ever wanted to see of bending lasers. It may use the upper atmosphere for that. And when they do that outside of the high power magnetic lines of a reactor, just how big of an explosion do you think it will cause?"

"So it's an Object…that turns its reactor inside out…so the explosion will spread into the outside world…?"

Of course, that would not be all it could do.

That electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon was just one use of its reactor. After all, the Manhattan was many times larger than a 50m Object. It would be surprising if it had only one or two trump cards. For one thing, how many reactors did it even have?

That meant it could have any number of giant cannons.

They had to assume even this might not be its greatest trump card.

"But in that case, this problem is only going to get worse."

"Th-there's more?"

"Why did it set sail like a battleship?" Frolaytia cut to the heart of the issue. "It of course wanted to safely destroy those bomb clouds out at sea before they arrived on land. Or perhaps it wanted to leave their path in case it could not destroy all of them. …But that does not explain why it is continuing out into the northern Atlantic even after blowing away the suspicious clouds. And I doubt it's anything as silly as taking a very long time to brake once it gets moving. It has to have a clear reason."

The Information Alliance's home country had revealed its true form to the world.

It may have begun as a preventative action, but they would not be satisfied until they could make up for that loss. Either the machines or the Martinis would change this crisis into an opportunity. They would remake this event into something that left them glad they had revealed themselves now.

And in that case…

(Will they make unscheduled visits to Information Alliance territories around the world in order to intimidate the other world powers? That way they can claim they chose to visit the dangerous front line and were not dragged from safety by an enemy nation's irregular action.)

Frolaytia once more adjusted her *kiseru* as she lost herself in thought.

(But what is the Information Alliance's internal situation like right now? The reports from Quenser and the others said the administrative system itself was trying to erase Manhattan… So is this more than just the core of their home country? I'm curious about the Martini in charge of New York.)

"M-Major…"

"Where is the report from this time?"

"It might be against regulations to direct you outside the military network…but please look at this video sharing site. The video getting the most views is a statement from the Information Alliance."

"…?"

" 'We of the Manhattan 000 are fighting to protect the lives and dignity of all races and ethnicities looking for a home and protection. We will oppose anyone who stands in our way and use any means necessary.' " The person on the screen read off some kind of message in a trembling voice. " 'This is New York's problem. So the Manhattan 000 will not hold back and will use its greatest firepower to directly strike the core of the evil deployed at New Caribbean Island and the surrounding sea. We must attack them.' …They're going to blow away the 37th, Major!!"

The ground shook violently.

The familiar green grass and trees were nowhere to be seen. Central Park, which had looked like an overgrown golf course, had split in two and something like a giant tower had stuck out at a diagonal angle.

It was a railgun and a laser beam.

The tower had two different types of cylinders attached to the top and bottom.

But did that girl understand that this set of two formed the electromagnetically-launched reactor cannon which was the main cannon of the extraordinary naval Object known as the Manhattan 000?

Several guard vehicles drove into what had been Central Park in order to separate Oh Ho Ho from the people screaming and running around in a disorderly panic. Their brakes screeched, their doors flew open, and men in black surrounded the small girl.

Something none of them understood was happening.

It had finally been set in motion.

But as the ringlet curl girl's eyes darted this way and that, she was not searching for the true identity of the Manhattan or the fate of the world.

It was something more personal.

Something more important.

"…ther…"

No matter how much she pictured that face in her head, she could not find it.

She was supposed to have met him here today.

She had returned to her home country in the hopes of spreading her wings.

She had done so much research and carefully selected what shops she wanted to visit.

They had agreed to meet here, so he had to be here.

This was exactly the agreed-upon time.

"Father!?"

No matter how much she yelled, there was no response.

Searching for an individual was useless when Central Park itself no longer existed.

Silver-haired and brown-skinned Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito grabbed the girl's too-slender shoulders and half-forcibly shoved her into one bulletproof vehicle.

She was in charge of Juliet.

She controlled those secrets which bore the name of a noble girl from a classic play. If Capulet was still affected by the Martini Series's rampage, then could she act as a trump card?

!!Confidential!!

To Faith Organization Central.

Venerable Elder. I offer this to one of the unparalleled flower petals which together form our great and colorful blossom.

As you so wisely predicted, the situation has crossed a line.

First the Hariti in the mangroves of the Mekong District.

Then the Fenrir in the North American demilitarized line known as the Greater Canyon.

The reports of their defeat have greatly increased the social unrest in the Faith Organization safe countries. But now we have a major scandal in the Information Alliance home country. Really, Venerable Elder, your foresight never ceases to amaze me. As they are shaken by these great waves, the people seem unstable, but they are actually craving overwhelming leadership and the appearance of a transcendent being more than an in any other age. If we make an effective strike now, we could solidify our foundation and spread religion more thoroughly around the world than ever before.

The Faith Organization has always been more threatened by domestic troubles than foreign enemies. The idea of every religion living respectfully side by side sounds lovely, but many seek only their own faith and see any other as harmful. We never would have gathered together without a constant common external enemy to direct our hostility toward. It is sad indeed to see our comrades fighting amongst themselves instead of working daily toward the love of god.

We will break free of this situation.

We will strengthen ourselves to the point that we will not fall apart without an enemy.

That is the purpose of catastrophe. Even during Ragnarok, once the gods and demon king finish killing each other, the resurrected god of light and the other

survivors are said to build a paradise up from the ashes. Venerable Elder, I am praying that you will take on the role of the absolute leader and transcendent being who appears after the fall. Please be prepared.

As for the situation inside the Information Alliance, our cooperators, who have maintained their fervent faith while remaining hidden and enduring oppression, have managed to spread our Ragnarok Script to the Capitalist Corporations without them knowing what it is, but I know you are concerned about the scope of the calamity. If it is insufficient, we are prepared to return *that* to the battlefront.

Yes.

A calamity for a calamity. One option here would be to return Skuld Silent-Third, the Faith Organization's greatest serial killer, to her position as a saint.

(The following is a handwritten text and signature.)

You have permission to immediately release the aforementioned individual.

May a peaceful holy age arrive to this sinful and impure world.

–Venerable Elder Tyrfing Boilermaker

And there was a non-Legitimacy Kingdom soldier on New Caribbean Island who did not have official permission to be there.

It was important not to forget that this had all begun with rescuing a sunken Capitalist Corporations submarine.

"Honestly…"

This man had been the captain of the submarine: Rigas Blackpassion.

Even if this was a chaotic situation and the Legitimacy Kingdom was shorthanded, his position was clearly abnormal when he walked freely out of the detention barracks which were locked up like a prison.

These days, it was not usual even at normal prisons for a crane fly-like drone to fly up to a cell's window and carry weapons or drugs inside. In Rigas's case, it had been a handgun, a lock picking tool, other small tools, and a satellite cellphone.

"Since I haven't been abandoned, I suppose we must have achieved our

objective."

While calling someone with the phone, Rigas walked across the volcanic rock that looked like crunchy chocolate.

"I would like to know the details once I regroup with you. It seems the timetable has entirely fallen apart, but how did you make a comeback from there? First of all, the initial plan was to let Piranirie have her victory and get away. The Legitimacy Kingdom was not supposed to defeat her."

He made his way to the designated coast.

The drone's signal could not reach all that far. The island looked remote and isolated, but his companions were hiding quite nearby.

"…So Manhattan is on the move."

The Capitalist Corporations determined everything through business.

And they were also aware that money could not be earned indefinitely. Even if the mint continued printing new bills, it would only cause the value of that currency to collapse. They would eventually reach the upper limit and they would arrive at a borderline where accumulating any more would be meaningless.

Also.

The Capitalist Corporations had glimpsed the possibility that, when the assets of the Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization all reached their final amounts – the values that meant the end of the world – they might not be at the top. They were the experts who loved money more than anyone, but they could not reach the peak of that field. That was more than just humiliating. So they had reached the obvious conclusion.

They would destroy that borderline.

That way they could pass that upper limit and continue to earn more money.

And to do that, they were willing to smash this planet.

"Then the Ragnarok Script is still usable. The exposure of the Manhattan should have driven a wedge of suspicion between the Information Alliance's Capulet and Martini Series. If we drive them even further out of control, that crack will spread beyond repair. Now, it's time to profit."

He arrived at his extraction point.

A small submersible had covertly arrived on the dark shore and someone was waving his way.

Rigas smiled thinly and jogged toward it.

But something was not right.

They were acting odd.

And by the time he realized that, Rigas Blackpassion had moved too close.

The companion waving to him was entirely limp and someone behind him was clearly holding his arm and waving it for him.

Also, a bloody katana jutted out from the center of his gut.

“E-eek…!?”

Rigas’s hips nearly gave out below him as the katana was slowly pulled out through his companion’s back. With nothing to support him, the limp corpse crumpled to the dark ground.

All that remained was a bizarre person.

It was a slender young man with silver hair and a black tailcoat. But he held a blade that was wet with a sinister red.

“Wh-who the hell are you…!?”

“Oh, did you get a peek of the nobility’s dark side? I can forget that people from other world powers don’t expect this kind of thing.”

The young man did not seem to mind.

He made it sound like he was only a mild case and was completely oblivious to the fact that he was proving just how abnormal nobles were as a whole.

“This was originally a civilian bluefin tuna breeding base I had built. It is true had given Tia-chan permission to stay here, but imagine my surprise when I bring my favorite Paris sushi chefs here for a visit. I do not recall inviting these suspicious individuals to my sushi party.”

“…”

“Well, knowing Tia-chan, it’s probably just the usual trouble. And by this point, I

am rather irritated as well. No matter how much I study the art of the blade, I just can't seem to save my cute little sister from her family situation. I doubt an outsider like you would understand, but you are the one that intruded. So I will have my say. …Do not place too great a burden on that girl. Unless you *want* me to kill you."

By that point, Rigas had been entirely swallowed up.

Swallowed up by those indecipherable monsters known as nobles who existed near the top the Legitimacy Kingdom.

And that may not have been the wrong way to view this.

If he had simply raised his hands in surrender, it may have ended here.

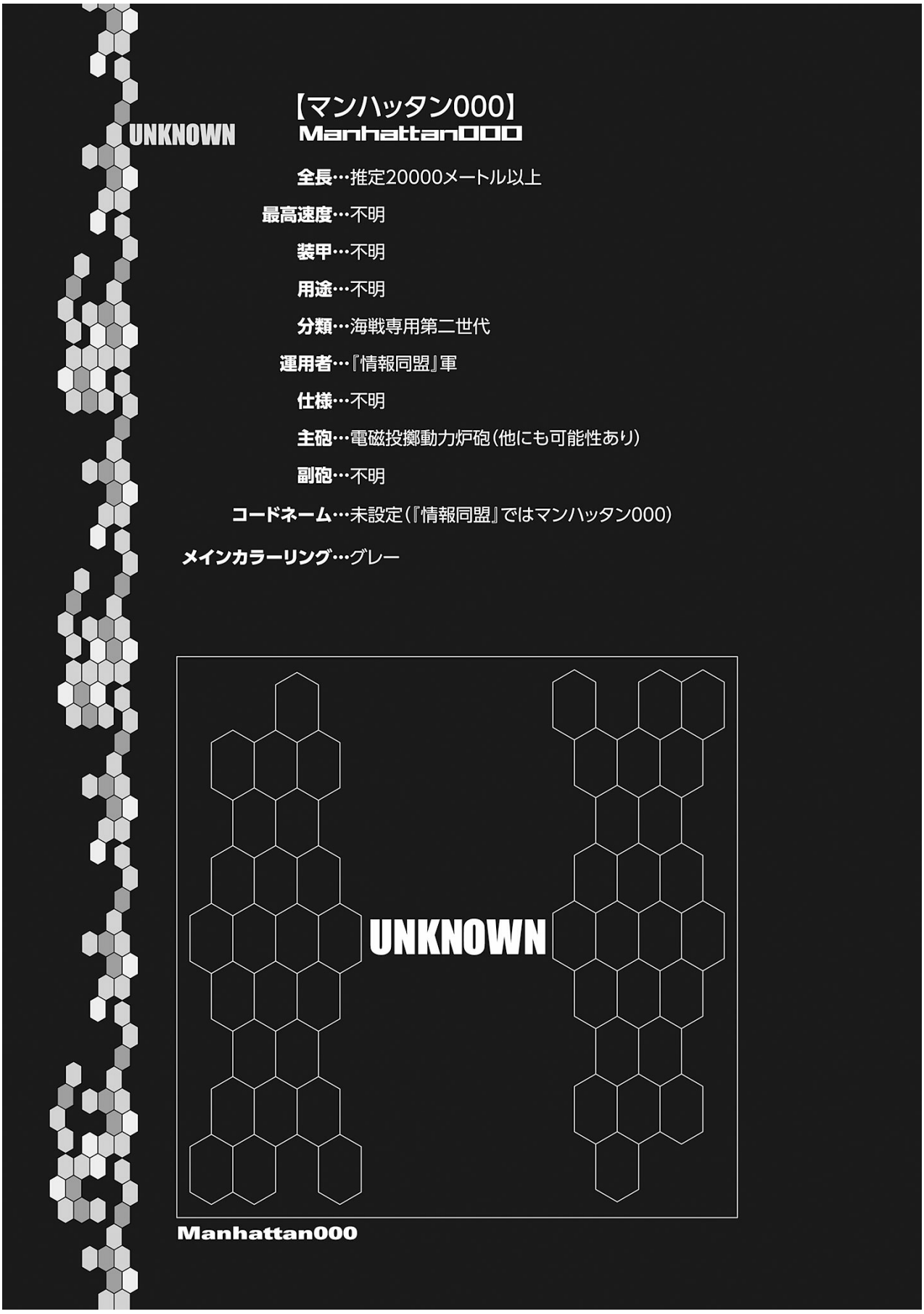
"The Ragnarok Script and a Martini Series rampage, hm? That all sounds fascinating, so could you tell me more? I know it won't accomplish much, but as her Onii-chan, I want to help Tia-chan as much as I can."

"Ha…ha…"

Before breaking out, Rigas had been given a card-sized handgun that only held two 9mm rounds. Still, a gun had an absolute advantage over a sword. They were about 7 meters apart, so he would clearly act faster. He could deliver a fatal blow before the young man could get close.

He saw no armed subordinates or bodyguards in the area.

All he had to do was kill this katana-wielding young man.



“Owaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

hhhhhh!!”

That was why Rigas Blackpassion took emergency action while roaring to motivate himself.

The silver-haired young man shut one eye.

And the grim reaper named Bloodrics Capistrano gave his pronouncement.

“I think I’ll start with that right arm.”

Everyone had underestimated his skill.

The many bodyguards had surrounded that silver-haired young man because he had a bad habit of *going too far* when he was alone.

“Dammit, they’re coming…”

Once a war left the pre-established harmony, not even the people involved could determine how it ended.

“They’re coming!!!???”

A bog of a conflict was forming with all four world powers complexly intertwined.

Afterword

Heavy Object has finally reached its 14th volume.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This series was designed with the 1st volume as the starter and the others as boosters, but after two curveballs in a row with The Smallest War and Northern Restricted Zone Cinderella Story, this story was meant to bring the focus back on the clean wars. …And the 37th's tough guys started dropping like flies. To be honest, of the different series I'm working on, this series has to be the one where the most allies die in any one volume. I guess that's because it's a story about war, not crimes. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed Quenser and Heivia's silly conversations.

This time, I placed the spotlight on the Information Alliance and pushed the Martini Series that supports their system of AI development to the forefront. They got the guest heroine spot for all three chapters. Ignoring whether they were an enemy or an ally, did you find a personal favorite Martini-chan?

The stories for this series tend to start when I find some interesting science news and use a broad interpretation of it, but one thing in particular has really stood out recently: AI. I'm impressed with how it is making the world a more convenient place, but I feel a chill down my spine when I hear how it's taking part in marriage counseling and job hunting. When I think about how the spotlight of success will more easily fall on someone with a more program-searchable life, I feel like I could write a book on that premise alone.

For the Objects, I tried to have them reuse old and familiar technology and phenomena instead of strange and bizarre technology. Paper armor, anti-tank weapons that use springs, and the strange phenomenon spoken of for ages across the world: mirages. I have several other Object ideas in reserve, but I tried to give these a unique coloration by using that common theme. What did you think? That said, the world of technology is not a straight line from the past to the future. You sometimes hear about the return of older ideas like bulletproof equipment that uses spider silk or an origami artist helping fit everything in the limited space of a satellite.

Even with the starter and booster setup, I of course still focus on them in order as I write them, but if you do read them out of order, I like to think you might find

that kind of “return to older ideas” in this series itself.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagi Ryou-san and my editors Miki-san and Anan-san. …With all the non-Object weapons making an appearance this time, it may have been a lot of work for you. Thank you for your continued cooperation.

I also give my thanks to the readers. We had Frolaytia turning into a little devil (… little?), Myonri shouting “boobs”, Lilim fighting with a barf bag, and Wraith going *dere* far too easily. This one was even crazier than normal, but what did you think? I think one important point is how the Princess nonchalantly escaped to safety. Fighting out in the open isn’t the only form of moe! You can find it in those who take a step back as well!!

And I will leave it at that.

Hey, you! Don’t say you think a 400-ton mama is moe!

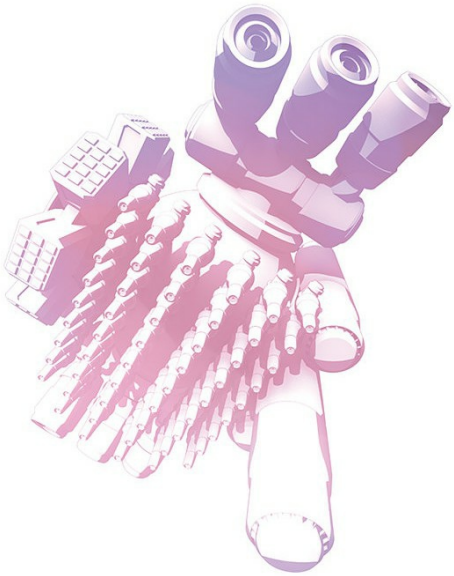
-Kamachi Kazuma

Heavy Object - Volume 14
- The Wisest Abandonment of Thought
— *Project Whiz Kid*

Author: **Kamachi Kazuma**

Illustrator: **Nagi Ryou**

Translated by **Js06**



2017-10-28